# Tokyo Ravens Volume 07

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東京レイヴンズ
7
DARKNESS-EMERGE-
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あずまこうへい
ファンタジア文庫

それが――出会いだった

「君たちと同じ道を歩む者だ」



# 東京レイヴンズ 7

_DARKNESS_EMERGE_

# 屠狼（レイヴン）は翼を広げた

真昼が守れるのなら、
あとはどうなろうと構わない


あの約束――憶えてる？

# Chapter 1 - Encounter

Listen, don't you dare forget this, it's a promise.

Of course, the boy had probably forgotten.

The vast courtyard of an old residence. The lost ribbon. The time spent by those two searching for it. The exchanged silly conversation. That memory from childhood was no more than a few hours, so it would be natural to have forgotten about it. That small, fleeting memory.

But the girl didn't forget. Even many years after that, she couldn't forget.

It was resentful and sad that the boy had.

However right now, that would do. Once more, with a fresh beginning. It was fine to start over from scratch.

It was a wonderful thing to be able to fall in love with him twice.

That's right, she thought.

## Part 1

Two ravens spread their wings under the thick, dense gray clouds.

An elderly black raven danced in a competition of magic with a young white one.

Magic flew like splashing waterfalls, scattering to the surroundings, mixing with the wind, integrating with the air, and stirring the aura. The two ravens danced within thick aura.

They bathed in aura.

Absorbing it.

Feeling it.

Harutora focused all of his attention.

It was the first time since he had been born that he sincerely and seriously wanted to 'learn'. His eyes didn't blink. He couldn't miss even a moment. He wanted to perceive time and space together and grasp onto the high-level battle in front of him, absorbing it into his body. He wanted to open all of his senses.

The movements of the fingers' seals. The paths of the charms thrown into the air. The intonation of incantations. The flow of magical energy. The swirl of aura. The techniques of practitioners.

It held a deep complexity, but he could believe that there was a certain simple 'core' that the sophisticated system combined with the 'strength' inherited from ancient times.

What were the Kuji-in?

And what meaning did mantras have?

Conflict and rebirth. The pentagram and the circle.

What was the five elements?

And what did yin and yang mean?

The truth and the answer to these questions moved vividly in front of him. The systems that had been hidden in the world - no, the systems that had been forgotten by many were resuscitated by these excellent practitioners and were currently operating. The tremendous scale was sometimes surprising, and sometimes it was delicate and precise. Moreover, it was daring, ingenious, swift, and powerful.

The black raven had mentioned a 'competition of magic'. This was actually a contest of some sort, a game that obeyed set rules. When they fought with their common

system as a stage, the side that understood the rules more deeply, trained techniques more attentively, faced things more calmly, and was more unyielding would triumph.

The victor of this 'magic' world.

Now, the aura that the two parties of the battle released reflected the contours of 'magic'. When it was infused with a stronger magical energy, the existence of 'magic' would become even clearer. The scene before them deeply fascinated Harutora.

Yes.....

He was fascinated deeply indeed.

He watched whole-heartedly, wanting to engrave it in his heart..... At least at first.

But.

...Damn.

After the battle ended.

The more he thought, the more agitated he got.

He couldn't touch the nature of his anxiety.

At the time, he had just been overwhelmed by the pressure. But even recalling afterwards, the important parts still felt strange, like a photograph that had been taken while he had been moving. The more he looked at it in detail, the more obvious it was that it was slightly out of focus. He made every effort to reproduce it, but when he approached the depths step by step, it became vague and unclear. Being in reach of it but being unable to touch it made him incredibly anxious.

The thing he had vaguely learned at the time could very well be a mistake. His extreme fatigue and tension had produced wishful thinking that couldn't possibly

exist. His condition back then had been too abnormal - that was something he couldn't change.

But even so, what he felt back then had been real.

It wasn't like his memory had become poor.

It hadn't become poor, it was just insufficient.

The more he calmly recalled afterwards, the more insufficiencies there were in him. He wanted to stop the battle from back then. There were things he hadn't seen - he hadn't completely sensed the decisive portions. He had that sort of understanding.

In closing, he was just not matured enough. At best, he was just an uninitiated novice. Anyway, he was only at this kind of level - his mood started becoming bad.

But.....

Before he realized, Harutora was compensating for his insufficient areas with imagination and constantly challenging them one by one. He was struggling to approach the nature of the magic that he had felt from that battle.

He lamented his immaturity and smiled bitterly at his arrogance, but he still couldn't give up.

Honestly, this weighty trial and error was even more exhausting than he had imagined.

What was magic?

Harutora was thinking.

And as the person himself was unaware - he went deeper and deeper.

"H, Harutora? Harutora!"

His childhood friend's familiar voice made Tsuchimikado Harutora come to his senses in a snap.

"Uwah!"

Two giant crows flapped their wings and flew in front of him. The simple shikigami Harutora controlled had become huge compared to when they had been created, and they were currently losing control. Harutora frantically tightened his grip on them, putting his consciousness in the simple shikigami. In the next moment, the two simple shikigami suddenly stopped moving in midair.

The two crows swelled to the point where their wingspan was about one meter. Since they had suddenly gained weight after they stopped moving in midair, they fell while flapping their wings. After they fell to the ground, they turned back into two shikigami charms.

Hah. Tsuchimikado Natsume let out the breath she had been holding. The practical skills teacher, who had been prepared, smiled wryly.

".....Dangerous, dangerous. What's wrong, Tsuchimikado-kun? You were doing quite well."

"Ah, well."

"Something drew your attention? That won't do. Being distracted while using magic is extremely dangerous. It's the same as driving a car, you could injure others. Please always realize that."

"Yes. Sorry....."

Harutora lowered his head shamefully. The teacher smiled slightly, but didn't show any forgiveness for such a naive attitude. He nodded with a solemn expression.

This was something that happened during practical skills coursework.

His classmates all breathed again and the tension eased, with waves of laughter going through the room. The red-faced Harutora hastily picked up the shikigami charms.

"Give me a break, Harutora~"

"You really scared me to death."

"S, sorry....."

"Ah, but it was very powerful, that thing just now."

"Yeah, it was incredible up to halfway through."

His classmates chatted openly to the shamed Harutora. The reason most of them wore smiles was probably because Harutora was a good person.

"If you think about it, it's actually pretty good progress. At the first, even using a simple shikigami charm was tough."

"Well, though it was still off, just like before."

".....Tch, I guess I'm just easily distracted."

Harutora's self-deprecation made the classroom suddenly break out in laughter. After the red-faced Natsume heard the evaluation that Harutora had grown, she also showed a happy expression.

Actually, even without Natsume's biased view, the simple shikigami just now had been completed quite well. Harutora's magical energy output had originally been overly strong, but recently he had learned appropriate manipulation techniques.

However, he kept making small errors, he wasn't completely familiar with the magic, and the problems were overall very conspicuous.

But compared to the situation when he entered the academy, it was as if he had been reborn. Especially his grades related to practical skills. He had already become

ranked in the top of the class. This was also relying on the several real battles he had inadvertently experienced.

The teacher's face was bitter. He didn't know how to evaluate it.

"Anyway, if you rashly allow your shikigami to go out of control, you might instantly be surrounded by exorcists and then become a responsibility for me to oversee. Please use your magic carefully."

"U, Understood! I'll focus carefully next time!'

The teacher jabbed at him slightly, and Harutora replied with a pained face.

Actually, Harutora and the others weren't at their familiar academy building right now. That academy building - the academy building that had been newly constructed after forty-seven classes of students - was being repaired now.

The reason was obviously the incident that had happened last month. The mysterious Onmyouji 'D' - the man who called himself Ashiya Doman - had attacked the academy building.

That incident had created huge news over the country, and fortunately no one had died or been severely injured. But the academy building itself had been ravaged by 'D's shikigami, which had caused severe destruction to the interior. Because it was a newly-constructed building, the damage to the foundations was small, but needless to say, they couldn't go about business as usual, nor could they repair while holding classes.

Hence, in the week after the incident, the Onmyou Academy decided to temporarily close off the academy building for repairs. In this period of time, they would borrow a different building for coursework.

The place that had been chosen to be 'borrowed' was relatively close to Shibuya. It was a relatively large, magic-related facility - the Onmyou Agency Exorcist Bureau branch in Meguro.

Right now, Harutora's class was using the Meguro branch's training room. Professional exorcists would carry out their normal magic training here. Though it was a bit cramped when compared to the magic practice field underneath the academy building, it was enough for one class to hold a practical skills class. Needless to say, it seemed a bit wasteful to have students using this place.

Also, there were several meeting rooms being used as classrooms, which was very convenient. Though the Onmyou Academy was a training institution formally recognized by the Onmyou Agency, it probably had to do with Principal Kurahashi's personal connections that the Exorcist Bureau had accommodated them to this degree.

"Well, though I don't really want everyone to know, my father is the Exorcist Bureau's boss."

Principal Kurahashi's granddaughter, their classmate Kurahashi Kyouko, had quietly explained this to Harutora and the others after the borrowing had been decided. Her father - also the principal's son - Kurahashi Genji was currently the chief of the Onmyou Agency, and simultaneously held a position as the head of the Exorcist Bureau. Of course, it was very easy to communicate the wishes of the Onmyou Academy.

Moreover, the Onmyou Agency couldn't stay out since the Onmyou Academy had been attacked. Astonishingly, 'D' had attacked the main branch of the Onmyou Agency at the same time as he had attacked the Onmyou Academy. Though the damage to the Onmyou Agency ended up being light, the Onmyou Academy - an educational facility where many minors were gathered - had suffered heavy damage

in its place, thoroughly shaming the Onmyou Agency. In that kind of situation, it was very hard to refuse the Onmyou Academy's proposal.

Even so, the Meguro branch wasn't enough to accommodate all of the students. Hence, the theory curriculum was scattered across other public facilities and various colleges, leading to severe changes in the instructional plans. But chaos hadn't happened, probably because of the teachers' determination to do their part.

But there were changes.

After the attack, there were quite a few students who had left the Onmyou Academy. In particular, there had been about ten students in each class of the newly-entered first-years who had withdrawn from the academy. Even among the people who stayed in the Onmyou Academy, most of them still hadn't left their shock from the incident.

It hadn't been his own fault..... Harutora and the others, who couldn't assert that, felt extremely bitter. The only thing they could take consolation in was that no one had left Harutora's class, at least.

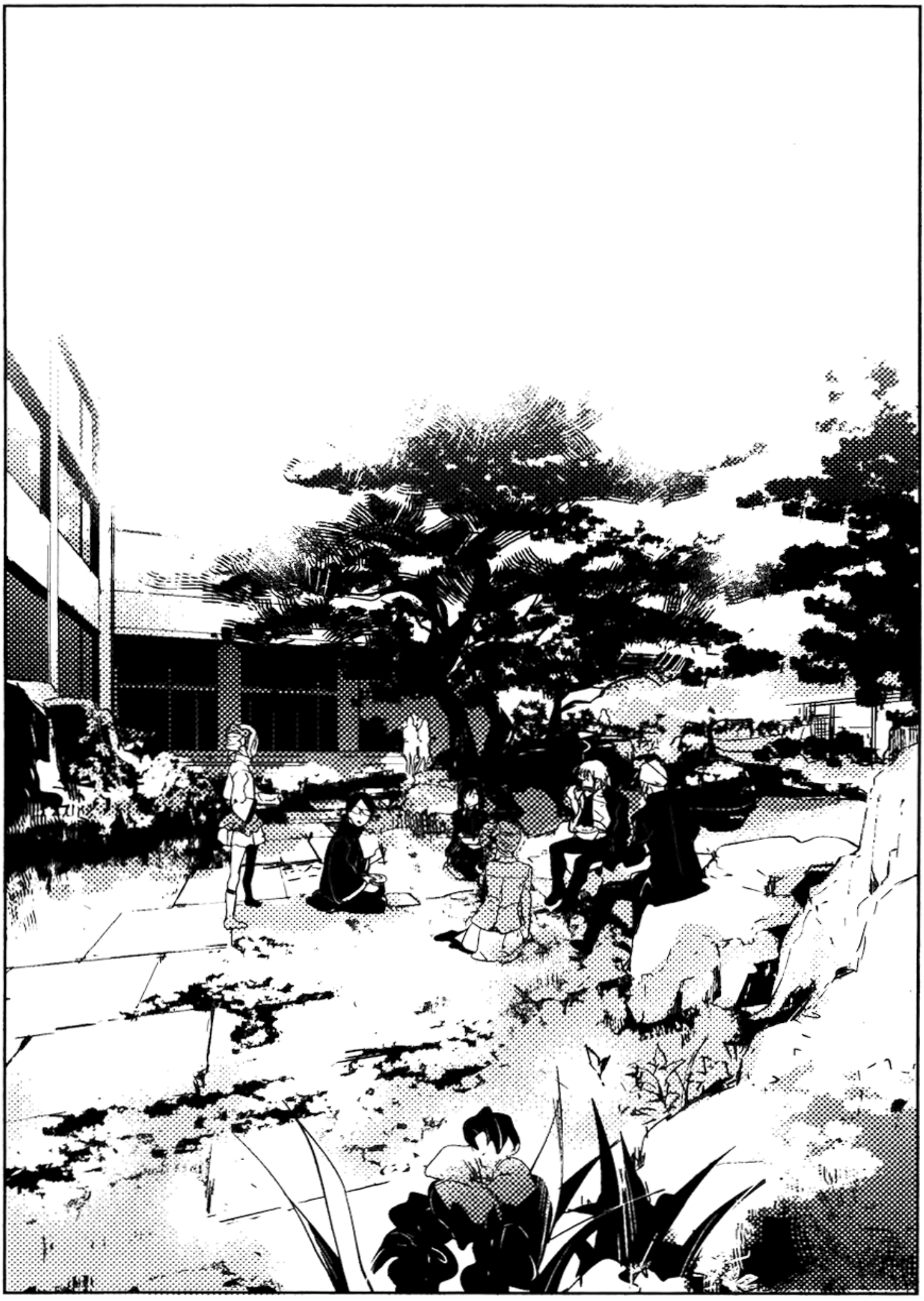
Harutora returned to his seat. The teacher clapped his hands, drawing everyone's attention.

"The place has changed, our environment has changed, but the magic we are studying has not changed. You still need to learn many things, so continue studying."

## Part 2

During lunchtime, they could use the branch cafeteria. But it was packed after the students joined in, so people would go to the courtyard to eat lunch when the weather was good.

The Meguro branch courtyard was a quite vast, breezy courtyard. The neatly paved stepping stones and white sand along with the pinewood trees gave an impression similar to that of a shrine courtyard.



The shining sun had already started melding into the colors of summer. The verdant lawn was extremely charming, and one would really want to lie on it and roll around while resting.

"Alright, let's go eat."

Harutora and the others arrived at the stone garden next to a pond, forming a casual circle and sitting down. Natsume and Kyouko came with him, along with their classmates Ato Touji and Momoe Tenma. Though these people frequently moved together, Kyouko often went to the principal's office to keep Principal Kurahashi company, and Tenma ate his bento in the classroom. Hence, it was the first time they had eaten lunch together since they came to the branch.

"The food here is really good. Exorcists get some nice stuff."

"Really? I like the academy cafeteria more. Harutora, you always ate everything clean too."

"I didn't say I hated what we had, it's just that there are more choices here..... Also, just eating outside probably makes it taste better."

Harutora picked up the pork in his katsudon with his chopsticks while looking around.

The courtyard was a much frequented location during lunchtime. There were many people who had come to the courtyard to eat other than Harutora's group. Several days ago, they had heard the branch members joking about how 'it was like a college campus'. They probably felt interested rather than annoyed at the students who had intruded upon their workplace.

"Come to think of it, there are almost no exorcists. This place is a branch of the Exorcist Bureau, so shouldn't there be dozens of people on standby here?"

"You're wrong, Harutora-kun. You probably happened to run across them a few times, you know? But it's very hard to distinguish them when they're not wearing miasma protection clothes."

Tenma answered happily upon hearing Harutora's voiced question.

Miasma protection clothing was the uniform that exorcists wore while purifying spiritual disasters. Like its name, the special outfit was to defend against the miasma produced when spiritual disasters occurred. That dark uniform with a matching belt and coat was the sign of an exorcist.

Just as Tenma said, it was very hard to distinguish a normal Onmyouji from an exorcist without that sign. At best, one could only speculate based on the strength or weakness of their aura.

"And I thought exorcists always wore that."

"How could that be. Exorcists basically only wear it when they're purifying spiritual disasters."

"Now that you mention it, there are also people who like to wear miasma protection clothing and kendo armor and fight against shikigami barehanded."

"Hahaha. Though I don't mean to show off, I fought against spiritual disasters barehanded later. Without kendo armor or miasma protection clothing."

Harutora forced a laugh at Touji's teasing. Natsume also recalled it, looking into the distance with an 'ah'.

Tenma's shoulders shook with laughter.

"That was something from right after you and Harutora-kun entered? The shikigami showdown. How nostalgic. Thinking back now, your independent training was all fighting. That was the first time Harutora-kun fought against Hakuou and Kokfuu."

Hakuou and Kokfuu were the names of the two 'Model G2 Yaksha' defensive shikigami that Kyouko used.

Since Harutora and Touji had entered the academy, they had continuously held independent practical training after school ended. Though they had received special instruction from their class teacher and practical skills teachers after the practical skills camp during their second year, before that it had mostly been mock battles conducted between Harutora and Kyouko's defensive shikigami.

"Right, Kurahashi-san and Natsume-kun had trouble getting along at the start. Now they can practice on their own and eat lunch together. Hard to imagine, huh?"

Tenma looked in Kyouko's direction, asking jokingly.

But Kyouko didn't look at Tenma. She stared at the tray of pasta next to her hands with her head lowered. The hand that grasped her fork didn't move at all either.

Then, she finally noticed that the conversation had halted:

"Eh?"

She looked at Tenma.

Then, she hastily said:

"Ah. With Natsume-kun? Y, Yeah. I was a little weird back then....."

Kyouko laughed and strung words together, but her smile was clearly empty. Tenma didn't know how to respond, just uttering a "yeah".

Harutora stopped eating when he saw Kyouko's demeanor.

"Kyouko, have you been a bit strange recently?"

"Wh-What do you mean, 'strange'."

"Well, I'm not criticizing you. How should I say it, you're always deep in thought, always absentminded....."

"Oh, are you not feeling well?"

Harutora's words also brought about a worried look from Tenma. Kyouko showed a bit of timidity under the gazes of the two of them.

Glancing at Natsume, Kyouko showed an uncomfortable, weak gaze that she very rarely revealed.

But she quickly got ahold of herself again.

"There's no such thing. What's more, you're the one who's absentminded, Harutora. In the practical training just now."

Kyouko's accurate response left Harutora speechless.

Then,

"That's right!"

Natsume rapidly chimed in from the side, as if it were her business.

Glaring at Harutora with a stern expression:

"Just like Kurahashi-san says, you're too reckless, spacing out while casting magic! Even sensei was shocked!"

"I'm sorry about that. I'm already reflecting."

"Of course! .....Also, hasn't your attention has been a bit lax recently? In any case, this is your first time thinking about other things while using magic, right? Could you be getting overconfident after getting just a little familiar with General Onmyoudou--"

"N-No, it's not like that."

"Then why. Is something bothering you?"

"Bothering....."

Natsume, who stayed sitting, suddenly leaned forward to question him. Harutora leaned back with a bitter expression.

Harutora thought of the scene from the training room again. While he had been controlling his own simple shikigami just now, he had suddenly sank deep into thought.

How would a professional Onmyouji control that simple shikigami?

An exorcist? A Mystical Investigator? How would a Divine General control it?

...Also,

What about those two people?

Harutora thought about these things that he shouldn't have thought about. As a result, his consciousness completely turned to that direction and he later noticed that the simple shikigami had lost control.

It wasn't just today's incident. Just as Natsume pointed out, Harutora had frequently been thinking hard and absentmindedly about various magics. Though he had seriously considered with his own style before, this time was 'different'. How should he describe it? It was a different kind from his thinking before, filled with doubts and uncoordinated feelings, making him restless.

...Well, it's not like me.

It was indeed quite a bother, but he couldn't talk about it with the people around him. He didn't even understand it in his own heart. It was just a vague impression, and hence it was hard to convey to others. Even if he said 'yeah, I'm bothered about what exactly magic is', he would only increase the troubles of those next to him.

But after seeing Harutora struggling to find words,

"It's not just Harutora."

Touji, who changed his meal every day, chewed on his ginger pork while muttering with a smile.

But the smiling Touji's expression was serious. He slowly surveyed the group around him.

"All of us more or less have our 'own business', right? After all, we saw that kind of thing."

Touji's words took everyone aback.

Touji didn't clarify what 'that thing' was. But everyone present immediately realized, marking the 'personal business' that he spoke up dead center.

The incident of the attack on the Onmyou Academy last month.

The climax at the end was a magical battle between Ohtomo Jin, Harutora's homeroom teacher, and Ashiya Doman, codenamed 'D'.

"......Ah."

Harutora made a sound, smiling wryly at his good friend.

"It was indeed very shocking."

"......Yeah. Just like Touji says..... it made me think about a lot of things."

Natsume also nodded her head honestly. Tenma and Kyouko, along with the others, didn't say anything more. In that moment, the five of them had probably shared 'that moment' again.

Many things had happened since Harutora had entered the academy. Natsume had been kidnapped by a Mystical Investigator, and they had encountered a Nue and

Divine Generals during their exam. They had even been sent out to participate in a large-scale spiritual disaster purification and had actually fought with a Nue, and finally succeeded in purifying it.

But Doman was the first time that they had been in a crisis where they could do nothing in the truest sense. He had made them feel that clear despair.

Afterwards, Ohtomo had almost completely overturned Harutora and the others' despair.

Ohtomo hadn't been 'victorious in battle'. Since the start, Doman had suppressed him, and he had relied on the Independent Exorcist Kogure Zenjirou along with his official exorcist team to resolve things in the end.

But from the start till the finish, it had been Ohtomo who dominated and controlled that magic battle. It wasn't a pure victory. Rather, he had been standing on a higher operational perspective.

"......Ohtomo-sensei's hospitalization is longer than I imagined."

"Ah, but Grandma said that he's already recovering very fast. Also, he's arguing about the amount of labor accident insurance with her."

"It feels like something he'd do. The principal's a lot stronger in that kind of negotiations, though."

Kyouko replied to Tenma's uncertainty, and Touji snickered.

Haggling vigorously about labor accident insurance with the principal. That kind of impression was very easy to superimpose over the homeroom teacher Harutora was familiar with. Natsume was probably imagining him in her mind as she half-closed her eyes and giggled quietly.

Then,

"I felt that he was a mysterious person from the start, but I didn't think he would be that proficient in magic."

A statement with deep feelings. Everyone present had the same feelings.

Touji ate his food again. Someone continued his words with a "So."

"Who exactly is that teacher?"

"Ah, I'm also very interested, so I asked Grandma. But she just said that he was a former Mystical Investigator and wasn't willing to reveal any more information."

"If he were just a normal former Mystical Investigator, the Onmyou Agency would be able to enjoy peace."

"Yeah. I heard that he withdrew because his right leg was injured, but if he had power of that level, it shouldn't have been a big problem. I wonder why he came to the Onmyou Academy to be a teacher."

"I don't get it either. Could it be that Principal Kurahashi invited him?"

"Rather than inviting him, it's probably more like he was grabbed by the neck."

"......Yeah, Touji's opinion sounds more like it, though I shouldn't say such a thing."

Natsume and the others chatted about how they saw Ohtomo. None of them had seen through the power of their homeroom teacher, and in their extreme astonishment, they didn't think that they had been tricked either. It was natural to go investigate for various information.

But,

"....."

Harutora's heart felt slightly restless upon seeing the reactions of Natsume and the other four.

Of course, Harutora had also been hugely surprised at Ohtomo's power. Though he had felt that Ohtomo was 'quite a powerful person' since he had instructed his independent training, he hadn't thought that his power was of that kind of level. It was completely understandable that he couldn't help but think 'how can this be' and wanted to complain loudly.

But the most shocking thing to Harutora from that incident wasn't Ohtomo's hidden strength. It was the 'magic' that Ohtomo and Doman had manipulated.

Were Natsume and the others not the same?

"Hey, Tenma?"

"Eh? What is it, Harutora-kun?"

"About Ohtomo-sensei's magic. Uh, don't you think it's a bit different from the magic we use?"

"Yeah! There's still a lot of magic we don't know. Most of them aren't General Onmyoudou in the first place. There's a huge difference in terms of skill--"

"No, it's not that kind of problem of skill. It's more fundamental....."

He really couldn't express it accurately in words. He looked at Tenma's blank expression. In the end, Harutora hadn't been able to understand the meaning of his own words, or perhaps was his question impossible to understand in the first place?

...Is it really me that's weird?

Maybe the 'restlessness' in Harutora's heart only existed in Harutora's heart. As for the other four, although they believed that Ohtomo's magic was 'very powerful', it wasn't anything 'different'.

...But.....

If it were like that, then it was actually only Harutora who had gotten the fundamentals wrong, or it was very likely that he 'still didn't understand'.

Extremely disturbing.

"......Harutora?"

"....."

"Harutora."

"Eh? Ah, sorry."

Natsume looked with a worried expression at the Harutora who was being distracted by other things again. She didn't get mad.

Then, she forced a cheerful smile on her face:

"......Yeah, uh, what about Harutora? It was very surprising, and it's not a problem if you want to become strong, but don't immerse yourself in it any more. In particular, that magic battle was 'special'. It's no help to suddenly focus on magic of that kind of level. We can only start from the things we can do with our own power."

Natsume cheered the speechless Harutora up in an encouraging tone.

"Harutora, you're also clearly growing. You made a very dangerous mistake in the practical class just now so you have to pay more attention later, but you're practically a different person from before when it comes to simple shikigami. You're growing and improving. Most importantly, it's not Harutora's style to worry about things alone."

"Natsume....."

It seemed that Natsume was mistaking Harutora's restlessness as a lack of self-confidence. For now, Harutora swallowed the true words 'that's not the problem'.

Even if he asked himself, Harutora didn't believe that he currently lacked self-confidence. That's not to say that self-confidence wasn't an issue for him. Rather, he felt that when it came to 'magic', he was fearless to a presumptuous level.

But, he probably couldn't convey that kind of complex, delicate feeling. Moreover, his childhood friend's worry made him very happy.

Harutora relaxed his taut expression.

".....That's true."

He smiled lightly back. Natsume didn't respond, but she happily glanced at Harutora's eyes, the corners of her eyes slightly reddening.

"Well."

Touji's quiet sigh changed the atmosphere.

"We can't do independent training after that, and Harutora's accumulated too much energy. We can't release it in the practical training classes."

"Ah, I see. Sometimes I indeed want to challenge myself as much as possible. .....Then, Kyouko? Will the academy repairs still need a long time?"

"Eh? Yeah. I didn't ask much about the detailed situation, but our situation will be going on for some time."

Their current situation where they borrowed places from all around was a big burden on the Onmyou Academy in the first place, and undoubtedly put tension on the repair process.

But many magics had been cast on the academy building and it had various sealed magical equipment. It hadn't just been the physical aspect that had been destroyed during Doman's attack, the magical aspect had also suffered great damage. In order

to restore it to its previous state, it would undoubtedly require a large amount of effort and time.

"I see." Harutora showed a regretful expression after hearing Kyouko's response.

"We could just go to some park in the evening, but that probably wouldn't work."

"Bakatora. That definitely wouldn't work. You'll be kicked out of school if you do reckless things."

"Then, can we use the training room here? Can they let us use it in our spare time after classes end?"

"Touji, isn't that also difficult? Even just providing it to us during the day makes a big burden for the professionals. Moreover, the Exorcist Bureau becomes busy from the evening onwards, right? It would be going too far for us to bargain for more."

Spiritual disasters would happen in large numbers after Omagatoki - the time from sunset to the dawn of the next day. They had learned after arriving at the branch that therefore, the Exorcist Bureau's true work hours were at night, and most exorcists were night workers.

The number of spiritual disasters increased year by year. The Exorcist Bureau's duties were serious, and anything that would impede their actions should be treated carefully. Tenma's opinion was extremely reasonable.

But, Touji said:

"But the work of the exorcists is mostly standing by, right? That's why they set up the training room. Don't they train while standing by?"

"Yeah, I don't know any details, but it's probably something like that, right?"

"In that case, it's not a problem if we go participate in their training, right?"

"Don't speak nonsense. Training of professional exorcists? We can't possibly keep up. We'll hold them back and give them trouble."

Tenma almost dropped his bento box when he heard Touji's proposal.

Exorcists counted as stars among professional Onmyouji. All who chose to be an exorcist were outstanding elites, and the people with this ability honed their skills through increasingly rigorous training. Anyway, they could be described as the top-class group of modern Onmyouji. Their training was definitely nothing ordinary.

But,

"......It shouldn't be a problem, right?"

That voice came from someone outside of Harutora's group.

The group flinched in surprise and turned around. A twin-tailed girl was walking over, holding a tray.

"Ah, Suzuka. Wasn't your class today in Shibuya University?"

"......That was in the morning. The afternoon is in the Meguro branch. It's really annoying to walk back and forth....."

She was the first-year Dairenji Suzuka. She kept her head lowered and didn't look over as she replied to Harutora, seeming to be balancing her tray to keep the Chinese soup on it from spilling out. The reason she walked a bit slowly was the same.

"Dairenji. When you said it wouldn't be a problem, did you mean my proposal just now?"

"......What else. It's just training, right? Well--"

After walking next to them, Suzuka finally raised her head, deliberately revealing a mocking smile.

"Seems like you're definitely scared of losing, right? ...Wah!"

"Hey, hey, are you alright?"

"I-I just tripped! Also, get out of my way! I can't get through!"

Suzuka kicked mercilessly, but Harutora just made space for her with a wry expression. Suzuka complained 'really' while - carefully - sitting on the rock where Harutora was.

"......Then."

Touji, already having trouble concealing his smile, said:

"Dairenji. When you said it wouldn't be a problem, did you mean my proposal just now?"

"I answered you just now! You're looking down on me, right!?"

"Well, well..... never mind that, Suzuka. Do you know how exorcist training goes? Is it alright if we participate?"

"Impossible. That's too presumptuous for newbie academy students! .....Well, if it were just 'newbie students'. If a Divine General requested, the situation would be different."

Suzuka proclaimed brusquely, then showed a fearless smile.

Suzuka, who was currently an Onmyou Academy first-year, had been a National First-Class Onmyouji who passed the 'First-Class Onmyou Exam'. In addition, she was the youngest of the 'Twelve Divine Generals' - though never mind her current circumstances - along with a famous individual who had become a celebrity of the magic community. Now, she was being punished because she had violated Onmyou law, but the only ones who knew the truth were the higher-ups of the Onmyou Agency and some related people. Even Harutora's entire combined group was

nothing compared to her power of influence towards people within the industry who didn't know the truth.

"So? If you bow your head and plead with a nice plea~se~, I might be able to help you ask. Since I'm the 'Child Prodigy' of the Twelve Divine Generals."

The second-year senpai couldn't immediately reply to the flaunting proposal of their kouhai. They stopped moving their chopsticks, silently exchanging glances.

...We could participate in the exorcist training.....

Confusion and hesitation were mixed into the eyes of Natsume, Kyouko, and Tenma.

But.....

During their silence, Suzuka started drinking her cold Chinese soup.

At the end of the lunchtime, the five bowed their heads to Suzuka.



"That's good."

The girl nodded and replied to the quiet proposal.

She stood up and breathed deeply. Though it had been her own wish, it was still a long-lost feeling of release. After checking the feeling of the hair that fell to her shoulders, her mouth naturally broke out into a smile.

"Ah, sorry for troubling you."

A voice not from the girl thanked the man next to her.

The man didn't reply, continuing to speak to the girl.

"Spiritual body abnormalities can recover in a night. But it's a huge burden to maintain it for two years. Even you will be in danger if this continues."

The girl understood this, but had made her decision. Even this man's judgment wouldn't change that. The girl nodded to reply to the man's advice.

"And there's still the conventional contract. You had best hurry."

Right now they could still easily use the altar. After hearing the man announce this indifferently, the girl showed a confused expression. The thankful voice just now once again interrupted the conversation of the two.

"Though we'll need to someday, we don't need to rush right now. It's an eventful time right now. Tiring yourself out is dangerous."

"But we should hasten our preparations. Half of those people have already been eliminated."

The man's words made the girl show a lonely expression.

Then, expressing that she wanted the people talking to shut up,

"I understand."

She nodded to the man.

Part 3

Extremely unfortunately, the influence of the 'Child Prodigy' of the Twelve Divine Generals was no use towards the Exorcist Bureau.

"We're very sorry, our training is part of our work. Never mind students, even professional Onmyouji and even National First-Class Onmyouji are not permitted to join in."

They were refused like that, with no wiggle room. Though they had long since expected that they might be refused in the end, they hadn't thought it would be this cold.

Come to think of it, the other party was really in the wrong.

There were actually many current exorcists who had come from the Onmyou Academy. Onmyouji was an industry that was governed by talent to a great degree, and people who possessed outstanding talent and had the will to become Onmyouji would set their sights on entering the famous Onmyou Academy from an early age. As for the exorcists, who were stars of the industry appointed from only the most outstanding people, obviously many had graduated from the Onmyou Academy.

But that was just 'many', and not all exorcists had come from the Onmyou Academy. Hence, the people who didn't belong to the largest faction were in a vulnerable position. This kind of situation came up in all organizations. These people obviously harbored resentment towards the largest faction, and even felt excluded.

Last night, the ones who had obtained permission to use the training room was the thirteenth spiritual disaster purification team belonging to the Exorcist Bureau Meguro branch.

Though they had only learned afterwards, Captain Eto of the thirteenth team was a famous member of the branch's anti-Onmyou Academy faction.

Of course, though they opposed the largest faction, they didn't hate the Onmyou Academy or the students. During the day, most of the members would turn a blind eye to the special case of the students entering their professional area. But of course, there were also people who questioned it, and a group that had come from outside the Onmyou Academy was particularly prominent among the opposition. Eto was one of them.

"Though the Bureau decided to share this facility, we definitely have priority. You just need to focus on your lesson plans."

It was completely true and irrefutable.

Suzuka, who had brought it up first, was thoroughly discredited, but she, who pretended to be an idol-type Onmyouji on the surface, couldn't release her anger. "Well, but, I'm also a National First-Class Onmyouji....." She just showed a twitchy, dumbfounded smile and continued her clumsy negotiations, but was completely ignored. Never mind her true personality for now, it was very refreshing to see the 'Child Prodigy' Dairenji Suzuka being treated like a child.

But just as Harutora and the others were about to give up, unexpected help appeared.

The Onmyou Academy practical skills teacher, Fujiwara.

"Don't say that, Eto. Even if it's just for a limited time, 'helping out the Onmyou Academy students' is a duty of the branch."

He seemed to have heard about Harutora and the others' request from somewhere. After seeing Fujiwara appear, Eto muttered "Fujiwara-san" as if he had eaten a bug.

Fujiwara had originally been an exorcist, and recently he had been guiding Harutora's group's individual training together with Ohtomo. Probably because of his character, he was highly respected all-around, and still had influence in the

Exorcist Bureau even after leaving. He clearly knew Eto, and from the conversation of the two, one could speculate that he had once been Eto's boss.

"Fujiwara-san. Even if you vouch for them, disturbing the team's discipline is....."

"Well, listen to me. Even if it's just for your work, learning about their power wouldn't come without benefits. After all..... it's possible that you'll have a mission like protecting them."

Eto showed a surprised reaction, and Fujiwara leaned in to whisper quietly. Eto looked at Harutora and the others, stunned - especially Natsume.

It seemed that they were talking about Natsume's true identity. "That's him?" He murmured quietly.

Fujiwara's lobbying had obviously shaken Eto's attitude. Though in the end they felt like he still regretted about their training time, he still bitterly accepted Harutora and the others' request.

But what happened after that was completely different from what Harutora and the others predicted.

The training Eto allowed them to participate in was mock battles conducted between exorcists.

"Don't force yourself..... Though I want to tell you that, at the least you have to show off for us as someone who's coming in and disturbing them."

"I'll do my best....."

Harutora replied gripingly to Fujiwara's relaxed tone.

Harutora and the others and three team members were currently divided off into two sides of the training room. They were going to carry out one-against-one mock magic battles. Though the exorcists didn't use magic much outside of purifying spiritual

disasters, it wasn't that they didn't use magic at all. It wasn't rare to hold mock battles like this to refine their skills.

As a result of drawing straws, Harutora was the first to take the stage. His opponent was Captain Eto.

"It seems like you fought with that Yakou Fanatic Mystical Investigator on your third day after entering the academy. Even an exorcist can't compare to a professional Mystical Investigator in a magic battle - in magic against other people. Don't be afraid, even though your opponent is the team captain."

"No, no, no, I wasn't fighting alone at the time! Also, that person was originally Fujiwara-sensei's subordinate, right? Do you have any advice?"

"Yes. He's undoubtedly far stronger than the current me."

"That's not advice at all!"

Harutora warmed himself up - strictly speaking, it was mainly to let himself calm down. At the same time, he breathed deeply.

The rules were basically that anything goes. In order to mimic a real battle, charms were obviously allowed along with magical tools and shikigami, and they could use everything that they were able to. Harutora's extended hands grasped a shakujou. This was a specialized magical tool that Ohtomo had made for him. He had brought it before coming to the training area just in case, and it seemed that he had made the right choice. This shakujou could help Harutora control the magical energy he wasn't too good with. As long as he had this weapon, he could perform in mock battles - at least, that should be the case.

"Don't falter, Harutora. You defeated a Mystical Investigator, you also defeated a Nue, and you just battled Ashiya Doman's shikigami a while ago."

"Ah, y-yes, that damn living spirit! Bastard."

"Harutora! Keep your calm and carefully observe the opponent. It'll be fine if you keep the mentality as if you're taking a test!"

"Understood. .....Alright, let's go, bastard!"

After replying to Touji's calls and Natsume's cheers, Harutora gave himself a push. Tenma shouted "Do your best!" at him, and Kyouko watched him uncharacteristically quietly.

The only exception was the troublemaking Suzuka.

"Uwah, senpai, do your best~ Show everyone your coolest side~"

She cheered for Harutora in a completely indifferent tone, not a whit of enthusiasm audible in her voice. This kind of cheer made Harutora lose his vigor instead. He hoped that she would at least shut up.

The members of the thirteenth team sat on the bench that had been pulled out from them, shooting them curious gazes. They seemed to already know that Harutora was a Tsuchimikado family member, and their expressions were as if unexpected show were about to start. Maybe they were secretly gambling. Of course, that was if they had been able to set the gambling ring up.

...For now, I have to focus.

He wanted to challenge himself as much as possible. Harutora had said this during lunchtime, and they hadn't been empty words. Anyway, he was an idiot, and even if he thought about the problem of what magic was, it would be hard for him to come up with anything.

He had been groping around since entering the Onmyou Academy. He had developed his skills somewhat, but his fundamental position still hadn't changed.

Just putting it into practice. He had turned the truths he had felt from his stumbles, falls, and injuries into his own flesh and blood. One drop at a time, he had slowly accumulated them.

That was all he could do.

With a booming voice, Eto asked:

"Are you prepared?"

"Yes!"

He replied loudly in order to disperse the feeling of tension, swiftly walking forward and confronting Eto.

"Then let's begin."

Eto proclaimed concisely.

"Kon!" Harutora immediately summoned his defensive shikigami.

A small figure appeared in front of Harutora, swiftly kicking off the ground to approach Eto before him. The girl wore a suikan and hakama, and had foxlike ears and a tail. Kon had already reached behind her back, gripping the hilt of her blade Kachiwari.

Ohh? The exorcists let out sounds of praise. There weren't many practitioners who could use defensive shikigami among professionals either. Their gazes suddenly gained some anticipation, as if evaluating what kind of level Harutora was on.

But the opponent Eto didn't even bat an eyelash.

Kon, who charged straight ahead, swung her tail as she was in front of him, using the recoil force to step sideways. She didn't lower her speed as she changed her path, leaping agilely.

Her small body flew through the air and her sword left the scabbard. Kachiwari's blade flashed in a line, cutting towards Eto.

But just as Kon was about to hit him, she suddenly suffered an impact in midair and was knocked flying with a cry.

Slight lag appeared on Kon's body from the force of the impact. At the same time, she spun her tail and twisted her body like a cat to land on the ground. Then, she turned her body to momentarily pull away from Eto. On the other hand, lag also appeared in the space that had sent the shikigami flying, and then a giant figure clearly contrasting with Kon appeared.

A heavy-duty warrior that wore a suit of heavy armor. This robust, inorganic figure was the defensive shikigami 'Model G1 Emperor' created by the Onmyou Agency. This kind of standard defensive shikigami was the most widely used among exorcists dealing with spiritual disasters. In addition to in front of Eto, another one appeared behind him as a guard, motionlessly checking Kon, who prowled around threateningly like a cat, and preventing her from coming close.

But just then, Harutora charged towards Eto himself.

A slight commotion sounded among the exorcists, and Eto was also surprised. It had always been Harutora's way to attack himself as the practitioner, but it wasn't a normal strategy in magical battles. It was even more unexpected because the opponent was an experienced exorcist.

Of course, even if he were surprise attacked, he wasn't so naive that his heart would falter.

The 'Emperor' in front of him quickly aimed at Harutora. Kon across from them loudly warned "H-Harutora-sama!", but Harutora didn't pay her any heed, continuing to approach.

Eto revealed a serious look, believing that this was just the recklessness of a newbie. He reached out, attacking Harutora by using the Emperor whose movements were linked to its master and intending to capture him. This kind of manipulation might have seriously wounded Harutora if he had been just a little bit careless. The exorcists all sighed.

But Harutora's thinking was the opposite.

...Alright, success.

Kyouko had once done the same thing. Because the opponent was a flesh and blood human - especially a newbie - one would unintentionally hold back when the practitioner was about to directly collide with a shikigami. Harutora infused the shakujou with magical energy as he had practiced, sweeping sharply at the Emperor's legs. Of course, he didn't hit. But though he didn't hit, he also defeated its attack.

...Think, keep thinking.

A magic battle involved guessing the opponent's intents, not just a simple clash of strength. Harutora had clearly learned the importance of 'strategy' in magical battles from Ohtomo and Doman's battle. There weren't many magics that he knew, and his skill in using them was also very rough. But how he combined the cards in his hand was more important than what level the cards in his hand were. Hence, he had to first clearly 'see' the aura and magical energy.

He 'saw' the opponent, 'saw' the situation, and simultaneously 'saw' himself objectively, controlling the battle.

Just like what Ohtomo had done before.

"Shikigami, arise. Order!"

The charms he threw out were simple shikigami charms. The things he had used in the morning coursework.

Two crows flew at a low altitude. One of them was struck by the Emperor that had raised its fist. But the other passed by the Emperor's body and arrived in front of Eto.

...How will he respond?

He focused his attention on Eto's body. Would he take priority on defending his body? Would he continue to manipulate the Emperor?

It was both.

Eto's fingers moved without hesitation, throwing a protective charm at the simple shikigami that attacked from the front. During his brief chant of "Order", his consciousness turned to the Emperor. This level of attack couldn't make him falter.

But Harutora wasn't so immature that this would make him panic. He stabbed out with his shakujou at the approaching Emperor, the rings infused with magical energy on the front end of the shakujou rotating intensely. Magical energy was Harutora's strongest weapon. The Emperor was suppressed by the magical energy and its giant body was pushed back. The team members exclaimed one by one upon seeing lag produced on the team captain's defensive shikigami.

But Harutora's target was always Eto.

Harutora saw the crow simple shikigami that had been knocked aside by the protective charm flashed with lag and stopped in midair in the corner of his vision. Eto still hadn't noticed the 'trap'. No, he had actually already realized? Focus. He 'watched' Eto's aura for his next move. Focus--

But,

"...Ah! Kon! Fire!"

Unable to read the outcome, he set down some insurance. Kon understood her master's intent, shooting out exaggerated foxfire. It was a feint. He wanted to draw the opponent's attention behind him.

But this was a poor choice. The obvious feint made Eto's movements clearly change. Harutora clicked his tongue, avoiding the Emperor's attack and leaping to the side. As he dropped to the floor, he extended his index and middle fingers.

"Bind! Order!"

The target of the released magical energy was the simple shikigami that had recovered from its state of lag - no, it was the wood-element charm approaching the enemy hidden in the crow's wings. Using the shikigami to activate charms was a tactic that he had learned in the practical skills camp.....

...No good.

Eto, who had just realized the trap, was already ready for it. Though he was burdened by the foxfire feint, he still didn't falter. He let the Emperor behind him fend off Kon, and the Emperor in front of him pursued Harutora. He himself easily dealt with the wood-element charm. Calm and composed. The power of a professional exorcist who had experienced hells. How should he attack? Rolling on the ground after landing, Harutora 'looked' at Eto again. Focus. A slow feeling of pain suddenly passed through his left eye.

Eto's counter - his aura was of the metal element. That meant that Eto intended to use a metal-element charm for Five Elements Mutual Conquering. Metal conquers wood. Then, if he could suppress it - he could still make it in time--

"Order!"

He stood up using the momentum of his roll and threw out a fire-element charm from the charm box on his waist with the speed of lightning. It was a childish charm

quickdraw, but this was also experience that Harutora had obtained. The metal-element charm that Eto used to offset the wood-element charm was stopped by the fire-element charm. Fire conquers metal.

Eto's expression changed for the first time.

He chanted an incantation and formed a hand seal. Harutora completely focused his mind. But he still couldn't 'see' everything. The pain of his left eye became more intense. Was this a magic he didn't recognize? Should he continue attacking? .....No, he couldn't. If he couldn't judge Eto's next action, continuing to attack had a very low chance of success. He changed his target with an instant judgment.

Immediately afterwards, magical energy suddenly roared as if shot from Eto's entire body. Never mind Harutora's wood-element charm, his own metal-element, the fire-element charm that attacked immediately after, and the crow simple shikigami were sucked in and wiped out in unison.

He finally knew what Eto's magic was. It was a barrier. He had put up a barrier centered around him, but he hadn't made it firm at the end, swiftly scattering it outwards. It was Harutora's first time seeing barriers used this way.

In that case, battling while targeting the practitioner would be a complete failure. But while marveling at Eto's skill, Harutora had already changed his target and was forming the next strategy. While Eto's attention was away from him, he should at least render the Emperor in front of him ineffective, even if it were only temporary.

The plan was..... Right, he would first use a water-element charm, followed by a wood-element charm. He would let the wood-element charm absorb the magical water flow produced by the water charm, thereby allowing the vines produced to increase in strength. This was a technique that had been shown while Ohtomo was facing Doman as well. Five Elements Mutual Generation. Actually, the other crow

simple shikigami just now had already been fitted with a water-element charm. If it hadn't been struck down by the Emperor just now..... No, he had to think about his next strategies.

Focus.

"Go - Order!"

He threw two charms at almost the same time. He depicted different magics in his mind, refining his aura and turning it into magical energy. Throwing charms was originally something that Harutora, who had plenty of spiritual power, was good at, but for some reason, his mind was hurting as if it were being torn right now. No, the reason wasn't unclear. It was because the 'nature' of every magic was different, and also because Harutora seeked a higher precision and a higher quality. He understood how 'rough' the magic he used now was, and did all he could to control the magic from getting out of hand.

To be honest, he was too naive. His charm magic was far from the precision and quality that he imagined. Even so, he still forcefully formed it. Connecting charm magic to strengthen the five elements. After the vines produced from the wood-element charm swelled several times, they covered the Emperor like a net, sealing its movements. But the intensely swelling vines rapidly started to flake and crumble, and could only hold for a while. But buying time was also very meaningful.

...How will the opponent react?

He rapidly turned his attention towards Eto. But the opponent's speed was faster. The Emperor's movements had been locked down - after he noticed he was too late to stop it, he immediately started chanting an incantation. At the same time, he fluidly formed a new hand seal. First was a dharmacakra seal, then - a seal of magic binding.

...Unmoving Golden Chains?

Damn. Harutora took a stance, infusing magical energy into his shakujou. He couldn't stop it, he was too late. Dodge - no, Unmoving Golden Chains couldn't be dodged. What should he do? He couldn't think of it. He could respond by 'looking'.

Focus.

"Ah....."

Just keeping his left eye open was incredibly painful. His vision began becoming fuzzy. Before he noticed it, he felt a scorching heat beneath his left eye. It was the pentagram mark that had been placed on Harutora as proof when he had become Natsume's shikigami. But right now wasn't the time to pay attention to the pain and the heat. He forced himself to concentrate his on his fuzzy vision, wanting to see through the opponent. He unconsciously gritted his teeth, and the hand that tightly grasped the shakujou was also shaking.

"...On bishibishi karakara shibara sowaka!"

Eto's Unmoving Golden Chains magic. It was coming - the moment after he 'saw' it, a paralyzing impact hit Harutora's entire body.

"H-Harutora-sama!"

Harutora heard Kon's wail, but couldn't respond. He lost control of his body as if he had been knocked over by a raging gale.

"Ah!"

He endured the pain, getting a grasp on his current situation. His body wasn't at the level where it couldn't move at all. He could still struggle on the ground if he forced himself. The shakujou that he had been continuously infusing magical energy into had reacted to Harutora's unconscious defensive instincts, putting up a defensive

wall of magical energy just in time. But Eto's Unmoving Golden Chains simultaneously suppressed the defensive wall and Harutora himself. Harutora tried with all his power to undo the magic in the gap between the Unmoving Golden Chains and the defensive wall.

But he didn't get it.

He couldn't see the flow of the magic and couldn't understand the magic. When he realized it, he noticed that his breathing had become chaotic like a storm. Though he poured magical energy into his shakujou and made every effort to escape, Eto's magic didn't show even the slightest weak point.

...No!

It couldn't have no weak point. He just hadn't 'seen' it. He couldn't accurately recognize the form of the Golden Chains. Ohtomo's shakujou had given Harutora a rare opportunity, but he hadn't been able to use it successfully. "Bastard!" He cursed unconsciously.

Just then,

"......The victor is decided."

The Emperor broke free of the wood-element chain's bindings and swung a fist down at the curled-up Harutora, who was below it and couldn't rise. Harutora clenched his teeth, a burning resistance instantly flaring up--

It vanished.

He had lost. This fact sank into his chest, making Harutora unable to help but admit it.

"......Hah......Hah....."

The roughly-breathing Harutora turned his head to look at Eto. Eto hadn't shed a single drop of sweat.

Behind the team captain, Kon's tail was bristled from frustration of inability to break through the Emperor. In the end, the two-sided battle hadn't been able to make Eto panic. In addition, Eto had basically beaten Harutora back while withstanding Harutora's surprise attacks. It could be called a complete, flawless victory.

...It really still wasn't enough.....

Feelings of admiration rose in Harutora's heart. On the other hand, it was more of a deep remorse and impatience at his uselessness. Kon rushed over worriedly with a "H-Harutora-sama", but he couldn't respond.

A shameful magic battle. Harutora felt deeply embarrassed at himself.

But,

"Hey, not bad, kid!"

"How powerful. Tsuchimikado really isn't just a title."

After the victor of the mock battle was decided, the exorcists clapped and cheered with expressions full of expectations. Unreserved praise flowed from their evaluations of the academy student's fight. Harutora, who still hadn't risen, widened his eyes.

Hah, hah. He panted.

".....Huh?"

Of course, not only the exorcists were clapping. Fujiwara also nodded, showing a surprised smile. Tenma clapped vigorously, moved. Touji was also smiling. Kyouko spaced out while staring at Harutora, and even the disgruntled Suzuka looked over without turning away.

Then Natsume.

"Bakatora!"

With a flushed face:

"I said to use protective charms! And it definitely won't work to rush forward yourself against a professional defensive shikigami! You're my shikigami! At least listen to your master's opinion!"

Natsume reminded him with an exhausted tone. Her eyes were also moist. After she muttered "protective charm" to Harutora, he finally realized it. Eto's Unmoving Golden Chains. Right. It would have been fine if he had used a protective charm. In that case, even if he couldn't completely defend against it, the magic would have been weakened and there would have been the possibility of breaking through it.

Moreover, that didn't seem to be all of Natsume's proposal. Her voice was a bit hoarse. It seemed that she had been continuously shouting throughout the mock battle, reminding him. But he hadn't heard it at all. So that was how deeply engrossed he had been in the mock battle.

The applause still hadn't stopped. Harutora didn't understand why.

Then,

"Quiet!"

Eto barked. The exorcists suddenly stopped moving and the training room became silent.

Eto slowly looked at Harutora in this silence. At some time, he had released the Golden Chains and the two Emperors had also dematerialized. Harutora moaned quietly, finally sitting upright.

"Do you get it?"

Eto calmly announced.

"I see. Though I can understand your reason for being arrogant..... Let this be something of a warning to you. Being an Onmyou Academy student and being from a famous family have nothing to do with this. If you want to be treated like a professional, you have to follow the appropriate order of things and come after receiving qualifications. Don't think about selfish things like skipping steps and special treatment."

His solemn tone formed a clear contrast with his subordinate exorcists. I don't care about that - Harutora took his words back before they left his mouth. "You--" The glaring Kon wanted to draw her wakizashi, but after noticing the complex expression on her master's face, she forced herself to endure it and flicked her tail.

"It's just like I said at the start. You should focus on your own lesson plans. You're ten years early to 'imitate professionals'."

Eto coldly looked down at Harutora. Though Harutora felt regretful about it, his words were indeed quite heavy. This weight caught in Harutora's chest, making him unable to speak.

"......You're as strict as always."

Fujiwara spoke to his former subordinate. His tone was a bit stunned. "Of course." Eto's reply was still extremely cold.

Harutora, still sitting on the ground, lowered his head and bit his lip.

Just then,

"......Captain!"

A vibrant voice unbefitting the situation rang out.

It completely ignored the tense atmosphere - more accurately, the obviously provocative voice came from Touji. With one hand stuck in his pocket, he leisurely raised his other hand, staring at Eto with a grin - but with a sharp light flashing in his eyes.

"Then, could you warn me next? I have nothing to do with the Tsuchimikado, just some special circumstances. As for special treatment, please be sure to let me enjoy it too. I'm pretty confident even with a 'pro' as my opponent."

It completely sounded like he was picking a fight rather than asking to participate in the mock battle. "Hey, idiot!" Harutora quietly warned him, but Touji didn't change his attitude at all. His dangerous, combative smile was the same type as his expression when he was annoyed.

Moreover, it wasn't just Touji.

"......How~ power~ful. Though I count as a 'professional' for now, exorcists feel more powerful than normal pros~ Ah, but isn't it alright if we're all pros? I never participated in a mock battle, so could you be my opponent?"

Suzuka said this, slowly rising from her seat with a business smile on her face. Her tone was polite, but the contents of her words was more provocative than Touji's. Moreover, an unconcealable anger showed in her eyes that stared at Eto.

"Hey, hey, Touji-kun.....!"

"S-Suzuka-chan. Calm down a bit....."

Tenma and Kyouko hastily stopped them from behind, but the two didn't listen at all.

Both staring at Eto:

"What? Revenge for darling? I'll suppress my personal grudges."

"Hah? Don't misunderstand, idiot. I just want to scare that guy posing as a 'pro'."

The two of them were no longer complimenting him on the surface. They seemed about to charge at Eto.

"Touji, Suzuka, stop!"

Harutora rose in a panic. But the two of them didn't want to look at Harutora, staring daggers at Eto instead. Harutora's face twitched.

Eto silently tightened his expression as he faced the challenges of the two students.

He looked at Fujiwara, seeming to want to say something. But Fujiwara pretended to be oblivious, lightly shrugging his shoulders.

Eto sighed, turning towards Touji and Suzuka again.

But just then, Natsume walked forward from between the two of them, holding them back.

"Natsume?"

"Hey, you!"

Touji was taken aback and Suzuka also shouted out, but the two of them shut up after seeing Natsume's face.

Natsume had become so cold she couldn't become any colder, an icy expression emerging on her face. But the heat under her expression even more fiery than the two of them.

"Let me say this first so that you don't misunderstand--"

She announced this with a voice seemed to contain some frightful, slippery emotion that would explode on contact.

"If 'pros' could do their job perfectly, it wouldn't have come to Onmyou Academy students coming to borrow your facilities in the first place, right? When the Onmyou Academy was attacked, where were you 'professional exorcists'? The reason we're asking for training above our level is because we decided that we have to. We want to protect ourselves by relying on our strength."

Touji's and Suzuka's challenges seemed too childish in contrast to her words. Eto's expression clearly changed and the other exorcists also gasped.

"Natsume-kun, you said too much."

Fujiwara immediately remonstrated Natsume. Natsume didn't rebuke him, nor did she look at Fujiwara, still watching Eto. Touji whistled admiringly. Suzuka seemed to want to complain that Natsume had taken the good part, but she finally just pouted without speaking up.

Tenma was also speechless. Harutora missed the opportunity to stop her as he watched his childhood friend's unexpected response.

Then,

"....."

For some reason, Kyouko stared at Natsume's back, showing an expression as if her chest hurt.

"Natsume-kun." Fujiwara warned her again, but Natsume finally looked at Fujiwara and said:

"I won't use Hokuto."

After briefly announcing that, she turned to face Eto again.

Proposing with a tone that didn't permit refusal:

"Could I have a bout?"

Part 4

The sky was completely dark when they left the branch.

They rode the subway from the JR Meguro Station to Shibuya. They could walk between the dorm and the academy building, so they weren't used to a crowd when they came and went to school. They unconsciously sighed when they got off onto the platform.

But the flow of people hadn't stopped here. Harutora and Natsume were quickly swallowed into the crowd as they left the station.

"It seems that Shibuya really is a big city in Tokyo. Though Meguro is similar, the crowds in Shibuya are on another level."

Harutora, who felt constricted in a full subway, followed behind Natsume while complaining with a taut face. But Natsume didn't respond. Harutora turned back over his shoulder, showing a wry smile after seeing Natsume's demeanor.

"What's wrong, Natsume, are you still concerned?"

"In the end....."

"It's fine, right? We let out enough energy."

"I don't really care. It's not like that....."

When the two of them were alone, Natsume's wording no longer had her feigned male affectation, and she returned how she originally was.

Harutora stopped, smiling teasingly.

"What is it? Is it about the proposals you made during my mock battle? Well, I really was a bit shameful."

"I-It's not that. Harutora-kun, you already did your best, so much that you surprised me. But that man called Eto....."

She still couldn't let it go. Natsume frowned angrily.

Then,

"...If I may, my thoughts are the same as Natsume-dono."

Even Kon, who wasn't materialized, voiced angry words.

".....Harutora-sama was just flustered during his battle. His arrogance should have a limit..... Kon will definitely defeat th-that rude man....."

"Wait, Kon. Please, just don't say that."

Harutora warned her half-seriously upon seeing his shikigami burning with the fires of revenge. After all, that overly-loyal shikigami had attacked Ohtomo alone once. If she did similar things to a professional exorcist, it would definitely develop into a serious problem.

In the end, outside of Suzuka who lost her drive, Natsume, Touji, Tenma, and Kyouko had separately conducted mock battles with the exorcists. Natsume, who was the second to take the stage and fight with Captain Eto, had kept up a long, intense battle, astonishing the exorcists. Just as she had proclaimed at the start, she never summoned her trump card, the servant shikigami Hokuto.

In the end, that competition had ended in a tie. Fujiwara had judged that an accident might happen if it continued, and had called for them to stop midway.

Eto seemed to be one of the three strongest in the Meguro branch. Though they didn't know exactly how serious he was from his poker face, Natsume already had enough power to match a skilled exorcist. He should have been used to this by now, but Harutora still re-experienced how fearsome Natsume was.

"Really, if you were serious and didn't get flustered, you definitely wouldn't lose to a pro. Don't panic and move calmly, no matter what the situation is next time."

"I haven't been that panicked recently anymore, right? After all, I've been accumulating experience too."

Natsume looked at him, talking back in dissatisfaction. "I guess so." Harutora smiled and apologized. Actually, when Doman had attacked, Natsume had commanded Harutora's group through several crises. If it were the first-year her - though Natsume had been labeled a genius since she entered the Onmyou Academy, she wouldn't have been Eto's opponent.

Everyone had grown as much as they could have. Harutora and Natsume as well, and the other students too.

"Touji's incredible too. That guy's probably the strongest out of all of us."

Actually, Touji had been the only person to win in the mock battle.

His opponent was an exorcist replacing Eto. After seeing Touji suddenly release his seal and become a living spirit during the magic battle, he couldn't help but be stunned, and Touji had used that opening to obtain victory. Afterwards, he had competed with a different exorcist in his living spirit state from the beginning - though that no longer counted as a 'magical battle' - and won again. In that sense, Touji was the one who had surprised the exorcists the most, not Natsume.

But in the end, Touji was also the one who was able to connect with the exorcists the most. They heard of Touji's complex past from Fujiwara - his side-effects from the spiritual disaster and the oni living in his body. Touji was burdened by such misfortunes and was fearlessly facing an oni head-on, which probably resonated with those who also confronted spiritual disasters. Even now, Touji was still back at the branch, listening to them explain points to note when preparing to combat

spiritual disasters. Although, knowing Touji, that might all be prior knowledge, hearing the facts from people who rushed to the scene might be more valuable than simple knowledge.

"For now, it seems like Touji gained quite a bit. This really wasn't bad, right? Judging from the situation, maybe we might be able to participate in their training again. .....Ah, well, although I don't have much confidence with that tamp captain....."

When he thought of Eto, Harutora glossed it over with a dry smile. He was the only one who hadn't changed his attitude towards Harutora and the others since the beginning.

Natsume frowned unhappily again.

".....That man called Eto only thinks about himself. He doesn't consider us at all, or what we're forcing ourselves and becoming strong for....."

Natsume rarely evaluated other people this poorly. The image of the quiet, angry appearance that the normally respectful Natsume had shown to Eto at the time reawaked in his mind.

Why had Natsume been so angry back then? And for whom had she spoken those words that were so unlike her? Harutora understood that, no matter how slow he was.

".....Thanks."

He thanked her in a stammer. "Eh?" Natsume showed a confused expression.

Natsume glanced at him, looking straight at Harutora's face. Harutora suddenly became embarrassed with that pair of pure, big eyes staring at him and slightly averted his gaze.

"To be honest, I feel that what that person says is correct. But we are more correct. That's why we need special treatment."

"Harutora-kun--"

".....Come to think about it, when I think carefully about it, I should have been the one saying the words you said, for sure."

"That's not true! H-Harutora-kun, you already worked hard. Really, um, you were extremely cool today!"

At some point, the two of them were walking side by side.

Natsume was a bit timid, with her head lowered and her face tinted red. She occasionally glanced at Harutora to peek at his reaction. Though Kon hadn't materialized, he could almost feel her tail swishing around.

In the end, even though his intuition could occasionally be of use, Harutora was as slow as always.

"Hey, hey, isn't this the first time Natsume's praised me? I'm happy even if it was just a polite compliment."

"It wasn't just a polite compliment. Didn't I say just now? You really surprised me."

"Ah, but, I was kind of flustered back then, you know? How should I say it, I was kind of feeling bad? .....Or maybe anxious?"

Harutora didn't notice her childhood friend gazing at him as if she wanted to ask for something, recalling his mock battle just now.

Though he had tried many things, he hadn't been able to grasp any kind of conclusion. Those were his sincere thoughts.

He thought of the battle between Ohtomo and Doman again. Even if they were both magical battles, the feeling that he still hadn't clearly focused on some important part still lingered in his heart.

...Really, I'm too stupid.

The disparity between the image in his heart and reality made Harutora extremely restless, as if his entire body was being bound by heavy chains. It shouldn't be like this, his heart complained as it couldn't reach what he had imagined. After seeing Ohtomo's battle, that ideal was probably too much for him.

"......Hey, Kon."

Harutora thought while asking as if talking to himself.

"What did you think today? How should I say it..... Did anything feel different?"

"......I, I'm very sorry. Did you say, different?"

"Yeah, it's hard to express in words."

"Hard to express..... hah? C-C-Could it be that Kon did something wrong?"

His shikigami immediately materialized and kneeled on the ground to apologize, but Harutora and Natsume hastily stopped her. After all, this was a major road, and they might be reported to the police if they recklessly had a young girl kneel in apology on the road.

"No, no! It's not you, I was talking about me. Please go invisible for now, please!"

"About H-Harutora-sama? I see nothing wrong about Harutora-sama..... but..."

Kon, who vanished again, spoke with trepidation.

"In the fight just now, I saw Harutora-sama enduring pain several times and was very concerned. Could it be that you are feeling unwell.....?"

"Really?" After Natsume heard this, she asked in surprise. Harutora also recalled it, pressing the palm of his left hand to his left eye. He had forgotten it because it had stopped hurting after the mock battle.

"Indeed..... When I tried to focus and 'see' the flow of aura and magical energy, I felt a lot of pain. I might have used too much power."

"While you were using power?"

Natsume looked around Harutora's left eye, muttering curiously.

"But..... Though we often say things like 'seeing', aura and magical energy aren't 'visible' things. Maybe we should use 'sensing'? Harutora, you know, right? It has no relation with sight."

"I understand that. But in a critical situation, I unconsciously think of using my eyes to see. It could be because it's not an innate and natural spirit-seeing ability."

As he spoke, Harutora used his fingers to rub the pentagram mark underneath his left eye.

When Harutora had become Natsume's shikigami, she had drawn this mark.

This pattern was also a magical symbol that Natsume had placed on Harutora.

Harutora didn't have the most basic ability to become and Onmyouji, which was spirit-seeing. Hence, Harutora had gone to a normal high school until one year ago even though he had been born in a branch family of the famous Tsuchimikado family.

But when Harutora had decided to walk the path of becoming an Onmyouji and had become Natsume's shikigami, her magic had endowed him with the spirit-seeing ability. In any case, the fact that the current Harutora could use magic was thanks to the magic that Natsume had cast.

".....Is that it? Maybe. I completely forgot recently, but maybe that's the reason. I couldn't see spirits at the start."

He had originally been unable to become an Onmyouji. Magic couldn't make up for that incompleteness, and maybe it had only started showing now when he had made some progress. If he thought objectively about it, that kind of possibility was very high.

"But if that were the case, it would be a problem, since after all it's an unsolvable problem. .....Then, Natsume? Could you just cast magic on my right eye too?"

"No, well, that sort of magic isn't cast on the 'eyes'. It's magic for the 'senses'. Moreover....."

Natsume's tone became a bit apologetic.

"Actually, that was a magic put together from several spells that I reconstructed. And .....the spell that formed the basis of it was something I couldn't completely understand....."

"Eh? Really?"

"Yeah..... my father taught it to me before. I know a lot of other magic involving temporarily allowing people to see spirits, but the magic I used on you was a Tsuchimikado secret technique..... I worked hard to memorize it because I thought it would definitely be useful, but actually it's quite a complex magic."

Though it was a magic that had been affecting his body up to now, he hadn't known the truth about it until just now. Harutora unconsciously thought about looking at the mark on his own face, though he definitely wouldn't be able to see it.

".....If your left eye hurts again, I'll have father look at the magic. Ah, uncle probably knows too. Maybe he could analyze it with detail that I can't."

The uncle that Natsume spoke of was Harutora's father. He was a Tsuchimikado branch family member as well as an Onmyou doctor, and probably was as familiar as Natsume's father with the magic cast on Harutora's body. As Natsume said, Harutora's father was easier to ask for help than her own father who she wasn't very close to.

"I see. Then I'll ask if I get the chance. We don't speak about such long topics often."

"Yeah. That's the most proper method if you're concerned."

"Ah. .....But Natsume, you really remember that magic clearly, huh? You said you would definitely be able to use it, but it seems like a magic endowing someone with spirit-seeing ability would normally be completely useless, right?"

"Eh? But, Harutora-kun - Ah, no, no! It's just coincidence. Coincidence, that's all! Well..... It was just a personal interest."

Natsume, whose face had suddenly reddened, started stammering. "Ah, hm?" Harutora, who was spacing out, replied ambiguously.

Recalling again, Harutora had suddenly made a request like 'Please make me your shikigami' to Natsume. That meant that at the time, Natsume had improvised a magic to endow Harutora with the spirit-seeing ability. As expected of Natsume, huh, it was as if she had been preparing for several years for a day that would arrive sometime. Harutora definitely couldn't pull that kind of stunt.

...But..... It hasn't even been a year since I could see spirits.

It had been a natural thing before, and somehow he had ignored it. But on the other hand, it had almost been a year, so it wasn't that strange for the impromptu magic to start breaking down.

But the turning point really had been the incident last month. Harutora had been moved by that magical battle between Ohtomo and Doman and had started to seek the 'seeing' strength of a higher level.

...But it was still a bit inexplicable.

He had witnessed several high-level magic battles up till now, and had come in close contact with the magics of three of the Twelve Divine Generals - The 'Child Prodigy' Dairenji Suzuka, the 'Ogre Eater' Kagami Reiji, and the 'Heavenly Blade' Kogure Zenjirou, three of the most prominent current practitioners. Suzuka was already completely a friend now.

But why had he only reacted so intensely when he saw Ohtomo and Doman? It deeply confused him.

Because it was very dangerous? No, even before, it had been sufficiently dangerous.

Because he had grown? It was possible, but wasn't it strange for it to be so fast?

Was it a problem of the environment? Indeed, the Onmyou Academy had received a deep shock on 'that day'. Doman had suddenly appearing during lunchtime and the academy building had been wrecked by shikigami. Though they had resisted, they had still instantly fallen into a crisis, and in the end they had gone to the roof, from which they couldn't escape--

...The roof?

Hmm. Harutora's face went tight.

Maybe that was involved. What was it..... Harutora excavated the important matters from his memories.

"Right. Natsume, what did Kyouko ask on the roof?"

"Eh? What do you mean?"

"That altar. The altar set up on the academy roof. That was exactly the same as the Imperial Hill altar for performing the Taizan Fukun Ritual back in the countryside, right? Why was that kind of thing on the Onmyou Academy roof?"

After Harutora asked, Natsume rubbed her chin and revealed a surprised expression.

"Now that you mention it, I completely forgot. It seems like at the time, Principal Kurahashi said 'talk later', but in the end we didn't go over it."

The Taizan Fukun Ritual was a secret ritual handed down generation after generation in the Tsuchimikado family. It was related with human souls - which was viewed as prohibited magic in the modern General Onmyoudou. One year ago, Harutora and Natsume's fight with Suzuka had revolved around the rite. The Onmyou Academy's Principal Kurahashi belonged to an ancient branch family of the Tsuchimikados - the Kurahashis. Though they ought to know of the Taizan Fukun Ritual's existence, it was difficult to believe that was why the altar was on the roof of the academy building.

As Tsuchimikado family members, they couldn't ignore this. Come to think of it, did Natsume's father know this?

"Though I don't know the reasons behind it, we should go ask directly. It's so important. If I had..... Thanks, Harutora-kun, for reminding me."

"....."

"Harutora-kun?"

Stunned for a moment, Natsume tilted her head and asked again. But Harutora stopped moving, seeming to be deep in thought.

Natsume also stopped, patiently waiting for Harutora to respond.

Not long afterwards, Harutora raised his head.

"Then, Natsume, do you want to go to the academy now and look?"

He hadn't considered it much, it was just pure interest. But when he recalled the altar he suddenly wanted to 'see' it. As the stage of that magic battle, it might refresh their memories.

They had gone to the academy at night before. But during their sudden visit now, the academy when it was still being fully repaired seemed like an unknown building.

The tarpaulin covering the outer wall flapped with the wind like the loud wail of a giant animal. There were still some places being worked on even this late, and the lights shining through the swaying tarpaulin seemed like the building's pulse.

The two heavy automatic doors at the main entrance had been destroyed during the attack last month. The ground was now covered with boards, and the outside was covered with a tarp to guard against gawkers. Harutora and Natsume glanced at each other, anxiously lifting the tap and walking in.

Then,

"Oh, it's you. It's been a long time."

"What are you coming here for at this time? It's not good to walk the roads at night."

"Eh? You're already restored?"

Two komainu sat on the pedestals set to the left and right of the entrance.

But upon seeing their current external appearance, probably no one would be able to tell that they were komainu. Though they indeed mimicked the appearance of wild beasts, they had many movable metal joints. More precisely, they looked like mechanical dogs sitting there. These weren't traditional komainu, but rather capable, vigorous forms that resembled Dobermans. The pentagrams carved into their foreheads left deep impressions.

They were the principal's shikigami, Alpha and Omega. They had overseen the academy entrance before.

These two were known as mechanical shikigami, as their vessel was their physical form. They had blocked Ashiya Doman when he had attacked the academy, and hence they had both been injured. They had been brought to the Onmyou Agency afterwards and it seemed that they had wanted to resume their duty before the academy building was repaired.

But,

"Unfortunately, the building hasn't been fully repaired. Hence, we can only expose our true forms like this."

"When the academy is repaired, we can regain our original states. Hence, you will have to wait until another day if you want to see our cute forms again."

"Cute?"

"Aren't they? I heard that I was evaluated as such among the female students, right?"

Omega said flatly - though it was hard to tell his vessel's expression now, unlike when he was mimicking a komainu. Harutora and Natsume unconsciously glanced at each other and smiled. They were a bit stiff in these areas, and though their attitudes were a bit exaggerated, they were therefore popular among the students.

"Well? What business do you have, to come to the academy at this time when it hasn't been repaired?"

"Ah. We're a bit concerned about the academy's current condition. Can we go in and look?"

"Go in? It's alright, but don't disturb the people still working."

"The academy still doesn't have defensive magic, so please keep that in mind."

"Okay, thanks."

After thanking the two shikigami, Harutora and Natsume walked into the academy.

The first floor ground and walls were covered with plastic sheets, and the tools and materials that the workers used were piled everywhere. The surrounding condition extremely resembled a renovation. Fortunately, the elevator could still be used like always. Harutora and Natsume headed rapidly to the highest floor.

The academy building's highest floor was the floor where the cafeteria was. When Doman had attacked, Harutora and the others happened to have been on this floor eating lunch.

"Uwah, it's so dark."

Getting off the elevator, Harutora inadvertently sighed. The first floor had still been lit with work lights, but the top floor didn't have them, nor were there any workers. Right after the elevator door closed, he couldn't even see his own feet.

"Is there still electricity here? Where's the switch for the corridor lights?"

"I don't know. If we look for it while it's this dark..... Hold on. I'll use phone's light....."

Natsume fished out her phone, using the light on the screen to search for the switch for the lights.

But before that, a dim light suddenly appeared.

The pale blue light was Kon's foxfire. The shikigami who had materialized at some point didn't pay any heed to Natsume as she put away her phone with an "ah", proudly raising her head to look at her master.

"H-Harutora-sama, allow me to lead the way, since it's dark."

"Oh, alright. Thanks, Kon, you're a great help."

Kon swished her tail happily after hearing Harutora's words. Immediately after, three foxfires floated in the space around them.

Though the luminescence wasn't as much as a light, their flexibility was extremely convenient, like lanterns. They could see the surroundings enough to move now.

The stairs leading to the roof were at the end of the corridor. The foxfire that floated around Harutora and Natsume began advancing in the corridor as per Kon's instruction.

The top floor was even more severely destroyed than the first floor. Though the glass shards had already been cleaned up, cracks in the floor and the walls, traces of collapse, and places that could no longer be used were visible everywhere. Some places were already completely crumbled.

The traces of an intense battle were still visible here.....

".....These were actually left by Hokuto running amok, not Ashiya Doman's shikigami, weren't they....."

"Don't say such mean things. Hokuto didn't run amok, she was fighting with the enemy shikigami! It was self-defense!"

Though Natsume hastily denied it, upon careful deliberation, she sounded like she was using cheap words to cover her guilt. Well, Harutora was just as guilty for the destruction that Hokuto had caused. Since the principal hadn't come to question them, they didn't need to pursue it any further.

Harutora and Natsume walked in the dark, deserted corridor with the help of the pale blue foxfire.

The air conditioner should have been long since broken, but they couldn't feel any heat. The tarps covering the broken windows gave off howling sounds, and the wind blowing in from the gaps simultaneously sounded out like a broken flute. The fuzzy images illuminated by the foxfire danced with the sound.

Harutora and Natsume didn't say anything more, only able to hear the sounds of each other's footsteps. They were returning to what should be their familiar academy, but it gave them an illusionary feeling as if they were stepping into a mountain path at night, some deep cave.

The empty, desolate passage leading to the altar.

Not long afterwards, they saw the end of the corridor ahead, illuminated by the foxfire.

There was the metal door leading to the roof.

The door that had been hidden with magic before was now directly exposed. Moreover, the hinges on it had already been removed, and the door was already tilted open. Kon flew a foxfire in, checking the situation inside. Fortunately, the stairs inside were almost undamaged. Kon floated lightly in the air, and Harutora and Natsume followed close behind, climbing the stairs.

The door leading to the roof had also been struck flying by Doman's shikigami, and a piece of rain tarp lay in front of them as an emergency measure. When they pushed aside that tarp and arrived outside, a strong night wind suddenly blew.

Though it was very dark, the illumination from the surrounding streets made things easier to distinguish than indoors. The pipes and mesh fence that showed formed a space like a jungle. Next to them was an approximately three-meter high wall, and on top of it was the space where the altar was, along with the location of Ohtomo and Doman's battle.

Just then,

"...Nnn."

The ears on Kon's head suddenly moved.

The foxfire simultaneously vanished, and she silently signaled for Harutora and Natsume to wait. What was wrong? Just as Harutora was worrying, she dematerialized, hiding herself.

Seconds after,

"......H-Harutora-sama. There's someone at the altar."

Kon, who still hadn't appeared, reported in a whisper. "Eh?" Harutora and Natsume unconsciously looked up - at the tall wall.

"......Who is it? A worker?"

"N-No, the person is wearing a uniform, so probably a student here..... But not one I have seen before."

Harutora and Natsume silently looked at each other.

Though he wasn't in any position to say this kind of thing, what could that person have come here to do at this kind of time? Even for a student, he couldn't imagine anyone with business at the academy building right now.

"Maybe that person left something behind and came back for it..... Wait, no. This is the roof."

"......What is it? I'm interested."

After all, the altar here had many implications. They were very curious what that student was doing here.

After Natsume murmured her words, she started quietly chanting an incantation. It was stealth magic. She hid the traces of herself along with Harutora with stealth magic.

The stairs going up were on the other side, past the pipes. Fortunately, the wind on the roof was very loud. After Harutora and Natsume hid their traces with magic, they cautiously and slowly moved to the end of the path, not letting their footsteps make any sounds.

Harutora climbed the simple staircase first, cautiously moving step by step. Finally, he stuck only his head up to look at the raised area.

The space was very vast. Moreover, there weren't any surrounding buildings higher than the academy building, so it was hard to see the corners of the space relying on the illumination from the roads below. But he could still see a fuzzy outline in the darkness if he looked carefully.

It was the altar. It was a stone platform surrounded on four sides by torii. He didn't see anything resembling a human figure there, but the lighting was bad, so he couldn't make a conclusion.

No, it would be enough if he 'looked' for aura in this kind of situation. Harutora climbed the simple staircase, slowly arriving to the raised area. He focused his consciousness in the direction of the altar with bated breath.

But Harutora made a mistake.

Though Natsume had stealthed him, Harutora didn't actually know stealth magic, so he didn't know that while stealthed, fluctuations in magical energy or aura - not to mention using magic - had to be stopped in order to maintain the stealth.

It was already too late when Natsume showed her head from the simple staircase. Harutora, who was focusing on 'seeing' had refined his body's aura and turned it into

magical energy to release it slightly. This slight magical energy destroyed the delicate stealth magic on its own. Harutora unconsciously shrank back.

He was at this distance, and it was so dark. Even if he removed the stealth magic, it was possible that he hadn't been seen--

"...Who is it?"

A sharp question came from the altar that stood in the darkness. Unexpectedly, it was a female voice.

Natsume swiftly came to the raised area after Harutora. Harutora silently looked back, and Natsume nodded helplessly.

"Wait. We're also students."

Harutora raised his hand, shouting clearly.

"We'll turn on a light now, alright? It's just a light."

Harutora dispelled any possible misunderstanding that they might be attacking, issuing an order to his stealthed shikigami. "Kon, lights." Dim foxfire suddenly lit up to the left and right sides, as if connecting Harutora and Natsume to the altar.

It was like a path of stone lanterns leading to the altar. One foxfire also lit up on the altar at the end.

A girl appeared on the altar where the darkness had been dispersed.

She was too far away, so she couldn't be seen clearly. But if she weren't wearing the white uniform of a girl, it was very possible that she might have been mistaken for a boy. She stood coolly on the altar with an upright posture, stern and proud.

The uniform that was a common sight seemed to emit a mysterious atmosphere different from normal under the dim illumination of the foxfire. Her upright stance

was reflected against the background, as if she were a young sovereign from the Heian period who had strayed into modern times.

But the most striking thing about her was her hair.

It was red.

Her hair, which held several hair accessories, was still clearly red near the pale blue light of the foxfire. It danced in the wind like fire decorating the girl's head. Harutora was taken aback and simultaneously stared intently at that unusual image.

The girl also reacted. She looked at Harutora and the others under the foxfire. Her hair swayed as her body moved.

"The Tsuchimikados--"

She muttered. Then, she seemed as if her breath was taken away.

Harutora and the others didn't know her, but she seemed to recognize them.

The girl on the altar showed a calm, unhesitant demeanor. But she suddenly tightened her attitude, seeming to have made some decision. She deftly turned her body and quickly walked off the altar platform.

Swiftly shaking her red hair, she walked straight over. Harutora and Natsume unconsciously took a stance.



Behind them was the dark night. Maybe it was because of their lighting, but the places outside of the light seemed even darker and they couldn't see them clearly. All that they could confirm was the path that the foxfire connected, the stone platform, and the girl. The torii that emerged in the darkness seemed like doors to another world.

The girl's movements were spry and vigorous. She approached them. She stopped in a position where both sides could clearly see each other's faces.

A pretty girl, and graceful. It was pleasant just to see her, and her eyes were also filled with a rational light.

For some reason, the girl looked excited.

"...Tsuchimikado Natsume-kun. Then you're Tsuchimikado Harutora-kun."

Her neat wording made them momentarily think that she was a nostalgic friend, surprising Harutora.

On the other hand, the girl seemed to be unable to hold back her emotions, staring intently at the two confused people as if she were reuniting with her family or her one and only good friend.

She suddenly smiled.

The motion seemed like a blooming sunflower.

"Nice to meet you, I'm Souma Takiko. I'm the same as you - one who walks the path of Onmyou."

This was Tsuchimikado Harutora and Tsuchimikado Natsume's first meeting with Souma Takiko.



A frequented bar required three things. Darkness, space, and a suitable clamor, though not jarring.

Anyway, integrating with the shop was the most important. As for that point, the Roppongi bar 'Authentic' was able to fulfil that item. Its broad customer base was also extremely rare. There were various skin colors and languages, and even no shortage of variance in generations, all unhidden.

The man was huge.

Even if he sat on a barstool, he still had a strong presence. He was close to two meters tall when he stood up. The cocktail in his hand seemed twice as small as usual.

His muscular body was extremely well-built and didn't feel sluggish. His short, gold hair reflected the dim light in the darkness, making one unable to help but associate it with a golden crown. His clearly-outlined face seemed to have some foreign blood, and though there was a faint smile on the corners of his mouth, no emotions could be seen from his narrowed eyes.

He seemed extremely fashionable, wearing a suit without a tie, and the wild nature concealed inside was hard to keep from spilling out. It was like the incarnation of a lion mixed into the darkness of the city.

The man sat alone on the left side of the bar, quietly emptying his glass.

But when several new customers entered the store, the smile that had emerged on his face became bitter.

There were three customers. After a floor worker's lead, they entered and immediately sat next to a table. They seemed to be already drunk, but they weren't noisy enough to draw the attention of the customers already there. But if someone with the spirit-seeing ability looked, they would definitely gasp in surprise. The three all possessed strong aura surpassing that of a normal person.

Onmyouji, and probably exorcists.

Onmyouji were rarely seen around here. Of course, because he had already strengthened his stealth, they shouldn't - at least not at first glance - be able to notice his movements here. Though it would be a bit annoying to leave the bar like this, it wouldn't be as foolish as drinking in the same shop as exorcists. What to do. He looked at the cabinet of liquor, putting the cocktail to his mouth.

But when the man's excellent hearing caught the conversation between the exorcists, he eliminated his presence from the seat.

"But those guys are really amazing. Even though he's a Tsuchimikado, isn't he just a student? Eto-san was too childish."

"Because that guy hates the Onmyou Academy."

"He doesn't need to be so hard to Onmyou Academy students. Gotta be fair, you know, fair. We got scolded enough afterwards."

"That's right."

The three exorcists all laughed. It sounded like the Onmyou Academy students were borrowing an exorcist branch. Moreover, in this short time, these exorcists had conducted mock battles with several students.

Their opponent had been a Tsuchimikado..... In that case, he could immediately think of the faces of 'a couple students'. The man had been watching from afar for the whole time when the Onmyou Academy had been attacked last month.

The three exorcists seemed to have very high evaluations of the students. The two most prominent were the Tsuchimikado family's next heir and the living spirit boy. The man swilled the ice cubes in his glass. What was that person up to - it seemed that he still hadn't awakened.

"But, I didn't think he would tie with the captain."

"Well, I'm not sure how hard that guy was trying exactly."

"No, he should have been quite serious. It was no different from when he's on the scene. I already believe the rumor about that kid being a certain reincarnation."

"Hey, hey, don't speak nonsense."

".....Now that you mention it, have you heard? About the legal reform....."

"Ah, right, right. I almost forgot about that. It seems like it's finally set."

The exorcists changed the topic. The man continued listening in the darkness.

"The spring 'Repurification' started talk again, and then there was the attack that happened last month. In the end, that became the deciding blow."

"Hmph..... Well, in any case, the Chief's years of hard work have finally come to fruition. These few years - especially the 'Great Purification' two years ago - made the related agencies put in a huge effort."

"That member of Congress called Satake? He seems to be colluding with the Chief....."

"The so-called young members of the New National Defense Party. Look at the news a bit, he's often on television shows."

"So? I heard from some Mystical Investigators that I know that something big will happen because of the legal reform. I don't know whether it's true or not....."

The chatting exorcists lowered their voices, as if concerned about the people next to them. The man listened attentively. But the single phrase he managed to hear was already enough for him to find new interest.

The Twin-Horned Syndicate.

".....Oh my. More terrorist attacks. Why do they have to do that kind of thing?"

"If it's the truth, aren't the kids from today in danger?"

"It's very possible. Similar things happened before too."

"No way, in the Meguro branch?"

"No, that shouldn't happen again..... I think....."

The exorcists' voices became smaller and smaller, but they still continued the topic. The man finished his glass and moved his attention away, the pieces of ice making clattering sounds.

Come to think of it, he didn't know about the movements of those people recently because his old friend had died again. Though it had nothing to do with him, he had still stepped out last month out of curiosity.

In other words, he felt very bored.

Whatever excuses he found, he actually was very interested in that group of people.

"...Check, please."

He announced quietly with a voice that only the bartender could hear.

The man rose from his stool, the left sleeve of his suit swaying lightly.

# Chapter 2 - An Old Clue

## Part 1

It was still an inexplicable encounter even when he recalled it after the fact.

"......Souma Takiko?"

"Yeah."

The girl showed a cheerful smile at the still-confused Natsume, nodding her head.

"You can call me Takiko. Can I also call you Natsume? ...And how about Harutora?"

Harutora was taken aback again at such a familiar way of addressing him.

Even the strong wind on the roof had calmed down at some point. The dim light of the foxfire illuminated Harutora, Natsume, and also Takiko.

If he looked more closely, Takiko was even marvelous-looking. Her face needed no description, but her red hair upon her pure white uniform was as beautiful as a doll. Was it because of color contrast? It resembled the particular beauty of artwork more than natural beauty.

Moreover, she really had the awe-inspiring charm of youth.

A slim figure with thin limbs and neck. The most eye-catching thing about her was her cheerful smile.

Takiko probably noticed the confusion of the two and revealed a somewhat embarrassed smile.

"Ah, sorry. I'm being a little too familiar. I know about your situation well, so I couldn't help it....."

She spoke a bit bashfully.

"But..... I was really surprised to meet you directly like this. Also, I'm very happy."

The smile that emerged on her pretty features was as if to confirm what she said was true, and it actually did feel a bit merry. Natsume's confusion became deep and deeper. She looked pleadingly at Harutora, but Harutora was similarly confused. No, Harutora was probably even more at a loss.

Harutora collected his thoughts again.

"Then..... Souma-san."

"It's fine if you call me Takiko. Is it really too familiar?"

"That's not it..... Then, Takiko."

"Nn." Takiko smiled cheerfully after he changed how he addressed her. That action seemed particularly native, though it didn't change her impression of cleverness.

"Takiko, are you a first-year or a third-year....."

After all, her hair. Harutora and the others couldn't possibly not know of her if there were such an eye-catching student in the same year as them. He first thought that she was probably a first-year student who had entered the academy this spring, but Takiko's reply was a bit complex.

"My circumstances are a bit peculiar. It's a bit complicated."

"Complicated?"

"Yeah. But I am also a 'student'. It's true."

".....I, I see....."

Harutora lost the opportunity to continue asking after Takiko's mild, vague words,

The way she spoke was casual and direct, but her original temperament and style didn't crumble because of it. How should he put it - she was elegant. Just this made him worry about whether taking the initiative to question her would be too rude.

Natsume coughed lightly.

"Takiko...san. What are you doing here? It's already this late, and you're alone."

Natsume recovered the voice she used when she pretended to be male and asked.

But Takiko showed an even happier smile than when she had replied to Harutora. Deep feelings of affection could even be sensed from her expression as she looked at Natsume.

"Definitely the same as you guys."

"The same?"

"Yeah. After all, you two came to look at the Heavenly Altar, right?"

Takiko spoke after turning her body. Harutora also looked in the direction behind Takiko.

The foxfire illuminated the square stone platform, and torii in four colors were erected on its four sides.

"Heavenly Altar? .....You mean this altar? You - Takiko, you came here just to see it?"

"Yes." Takiko nodded after hearing Harutora ask. But she just expressed agreement without explanation, and it was impossible to speculate any further about the situation.

Come to think about it, why did she know about the existence of this altar? If the principal hadn't brought Harutora and Natsume here during that attack, they wouldn't

have known that this altar was on the academy roof. Most importantly, those stairs, which were the only means of access to the roof, had been concealed with magic. Harutora hadn't been to the Onmyou Academy for a year yet, but he had never noticed the academy roof.

Or, had Takiko only learned about this altar after the attack. Even so, it was still a bit strange.

Actually, most of the students still didn't know about the magical battle between Doman and Ohtomo. It was even less probable for them to know that the academy roof had been their battlefield or about the altar set there. The final finishing blow had been on the ground - in front of the academy entrance - and all of the students taking refuge in the underground magic arena thought that an Independent Exorcist had rushed here and defeated 'D'. That explanation wasn't wrong, and those who knew the truth also yielded and didn't explain.

Of course, compared to thinking nonsensically, directly asking the person herself in front of him would be more effective.

But,

"Hm....."

Though he wanted to ask about her situation in detail, when he looked at the smiling Takiko watching him, it was hard to ask smoothly.

Also, why did this girl take such a familiar attitude on their first meeting? It was like she completely trusted them.

Natsume was indeed very famous in the academy, and there were several people who looked up to her. But with the 'rumors' that surrounded her, there were very few people who wanted to form a close relationship with her.

Moreover, Takiko's attitude wasn't exactly like looking up or admiring Natsume. How should he describe it.....? It was a look as if she were seeing a companion. Moreover, she looked at Harutora the same way. To be honest, it was confusing. But even if Takiko's attitude held some hidden information, he couldn't feel any negative emotions like animosity or malice from it.

Also.....

As expected, he thought of it. A familiar attitude and a refreshing youthfulness. Harutora's thoughts became increasingly jarred.

Before he realized it, Harutora was already unable to move his gaze away from the person staring intently at him. He seemed to want to call out a name.

Hokuto.

Natsume coughed forcefully.

".....Takiko-san. If I may, do you know what this altar is?"

Natsume's voice seemed stiffer than when she had spoken before. Probably just a mistake.

Takiko's attitude was as if Natsume was joking.

"How could I!"

She smiled brightly.

Immediately after,

"Someone like me wouldn't be able to understand the Heavenly Altar. After all, this Heavenly Altar was the essence of the Tsuchimikado family's magic - the strongest magic legacy that Abe no Seimei left behind! Even Tsuchimikado Yakou, who was the closest to the mystery of the Heavenly Altar, couldn't fully understand it....."

Natsume's expression went rigid for a moment.

Right afterwards, Harutora also understood the meaning in Takiko's words. He looked at her again, stunned.

"What does that mean?'

Natsume asked sharply.

"Could it be that..... you know about the ritual performed here?"

"You mean the 'Taizan Fukun Ritual'? Of course. But it would be presumptuous of me to claim that I even know just a tip of the iceberg."

Takiko replied honestly. Natsume's eyes widened and her lips pressed together.

Harutora was also speechless.

".....Eh? What? Wasn't the Taizan Fukun Ritual a secret ritual of the Tsuchimikado family.....?"

He whispered to Natsume next to him for confirmation.

Natsume didn't move her gaze from Takiko.

".....Even if all you know is the name, you still know. But you shouldn't speak of it together with Yakou's name. More importantly, there are even fewer people who can casually assert that this is that altar."

The expression with which Natsume watched the girl instantly went serious.

Indeed, of the people around them, only Suzuka could speak of the Taizan Fukun Ritual in such detail, and she was a researcher of the Imperial Onmyoudou that Tsuchimikado Yakou had formulated. The Taizan Fukun Ritual that Takiko spoke of, along with her connecting it to Tsuchimikado Yakou, proved that her knowledge of this business was not to be underestimated.

Takiko showed a weak smile at Natsume's expression of alarm, as if she were saying that this was troublesome. At the same time, her expression was mixed with naughtiness as if she were happy that Natsume had 'recognized' her.

".....Who exactly are you?"

Natsume asked directly. Harutora breathed out quietly.

"Didn't I say already? I'm the same as you, someone walking the path of Onmyoudou."

Takiko replied, her manner of speech like a breeze blowing through the prairie.

As if summoned by her voice, the calm night wind started blowing again. Natsume's black hair, tied with a pink ribbon, swayed to the wind along with Takiko's red hair.

Takiko closed her mouth and laughed quietly.

".....What an unexpected encounter. It makes me happy enough to dance. Although, if I say too much, I might be scolded....."

The girl shot them an expression of goodwill, just like before.

After Natsume and Harutora slowly glanced at each other:

"Do you know? The whole story of why the Heavenly Altar is at the Onmyou Academy?"



"Yo, good morning~"

"Hmm? You're here again?'

"What is it? You're off today, right?"

The Onmyou Academy building during repairs. Alpha and Omega questioned Harutora, Natsume, and Touji in surprise after seeing them appear while pushing aside the tarp over the entrance.

It was ten in the morning on Sunday. Because the Onmyou Academy didn't have class, Harutora and Touji wore casual clothes. Only Natsume was still dressed in her uniform, purely because she didn't have any casual clothes other than pullovers she wore indoors.

"Everyone's off work outside, but the repair work is still going on in the academy building."

"Roaming around will disturb the work. It's not a good idea."

"No, no, that's not it. We've come to inspect something today. It's studying, studying."

"We want to investigate some old information. Can we enter the library right now?'

Harutora rebutted the komainu's advice and Natsume asked this. "The library?" Alpha checked.

"You can enter..... But in the end, the enemy shikigami made that place into a mess during the commotion."

"Huh? Really?"

"Yeah. That person seemed to be looking for something. He invaded the library first."

Harutora and Natsume glanced at each other after hearing Omega's explanation.

".....Come to think of it, Ashiya Doman's target was the Raven's Wing in the first place."

Touji muttered from behind them. "Yeah." Harutora echoed his thoughts.

"Well, it's alright. The information wasn't burned or made unreadable, right? It's actually better if the locks were destroyed. For now, let's go in and look."

"Yeah. ...Alpha, Omega, can we?"

"Nn. It is admirable to wish to study even during weekends."

"If you clean it up a bit while you're there, it'll save the workers some trouble."

"Okay, bye....."

Harutora spoke and was about to walk into the academy building, but he suddenly stopped as if he noticed something. He stared intently at Alpha's face.

His gaze fell on the forehead of the Doberman-like vessel. The pentagram pattern drawn in ink.

".....What is it?"

"Is there something on my face?"

"Ah, sorry. It's nothing. Bye."

The komainu asked concernedly, but Harutora smiled and glossed it over. The three of them swiftly entered the building together and walked to the elevator.

Harutora relaxed his breath after the elevator door closed.

".....I only noticed now, Alpha and Omega have pentagrams on their heads. They've always been the door guards of the academy, so maybe they're related to what Souma-san talked about yesterday."

"That's unlikely. Though the pentagram is the Tsuchimikado family crest, it's also the most representative magic symbol of Onmyoudou. In the end, it wasn't Tsuchimikado Yakou's mark."

Natsume denied Harutora's expressed thoughts somewhat unhappily.

But,

"......Hmm. If that Souma Takiko girl was telling the truth, I wouldn't be surprised even if you said Alpha and Omega were originally Yakou's shikigami."

"Touji, you too? Those two are the principal's shikigami!"

"That's right now. But they're mechanical shikigami, right? Even if the magical energy they move with now comes from the principal, that doesn't mean the principal created them, right?"

"The Kurahashi family definitely created them."

"Probably. But the other probability isn't zero. After all, 'the Onmyou Academy's predecessor was a private school that Yakou created'."

Touji leaned on a side of the elevator, speaking indifferently. Natsume pouted, seeming somewhat unconvinced.

"After hearing those words, it makes sense that the genuine Raven's Wing was at the Onmyou Academy instead of being kept at the Onmyou Agency. How suspicious."

Touji continued to speak cynically, and Natsume didn't respond.

Harutora scratched his head.

...Things seemed to be getting more and more complicated.....

He thought about what Takiko had said last night.

She had informed them of the reasons that the altar was hidden in the Onmyou Academy, along with the origins of the Onmyou Academy's predecessor.

Needless to say, the Onmyou Academy was an educational institution meant to train professional Onmyouji. The so-called 'professional' here meant those who obtained the Onmyou Agency qualifications of 'First-Class Onmyou', 'Second-Class Onmyou', or 'Third-Class Onmyou', in accordance with Onmyoudou regulations. Right now, it was basically the same as 'becoming a standalone Onmyouji'.

But according to what Takiko said, when the Onmyou Academy had been first established, its goal was somewhat different from 'creating standalone Onmyouji'.

"Think about it."

Takiko had said to Harutora and Natsume.

"The two of you are the forty-seventh class of Onmyou Academy students. The Onmyou Academy opened almost fifty years ago. But Onmyouji obviously already existed before then. As for Onmyouji before that, most of them were born in famous traditional families or were students of sects, and there were no 'educational institutions' that accepted ordinary people. But..... Starting from a certain time, the demand for Onmyouji surged."

That was the period of the Pacific Theater. The time when the Onmyou Bureau, which had been abolished after the Meiji Restoration, had been revived by the higher-ups of the Imperial Army.

It was also the period when Tsuchimikado Yakou emerged in the world.

"The Onmyou Bureau, which had been reborn and attached to the military, recruited all the capable Onmyouji, shugenja, and tantric monks at the time. Those were the true practitioners, who used what is now called first-class magic. ...But during the war, manpower was still absolutely insufficient. Because they abolished the old

habits and practices that had been in place until then, they opened the doors to everyone who possessed qualifications to be a practitioner and founded an institution to train Onmyouji. The person who did that was no other than Tsuchimikado Yakou."

It had been called the 'Yakou Academy'. The organization that Takiko had called the Onmyou Academy's predecessor.

".....But no one knows the detailed situation. There's still one way to look at it, which is that the Yakou Academy was an organization that people who gathered around Tsuchimikado Yakou spontaneously established, and which didn't have the will of Yakou himself. Maybe that way of saying things is more fitting to reality. Because right now, there are almost no official records concerning the Yakou Academy left behind."

In any case, this Yakou Academy had still existed through the decline of Yakou, who had been the principal, and had become a birthplace for Onmyouji. After all, even though it split away from the military after their defeat, the Onmyou Bureau was responsible for dealing with the spiritual disasters that filled Tokyo after the war, and often needed new fighting power and new Onmyouji.

Afterwards, the accumulation of members' experience and reliability of strategies for dealing with spiritual disasters temporarily brought about a stable period, the Onmyou Bureau started fumbling around at its future development as an organization. In order to eliminate its image in the world of 'having once belonged to the military', it started officiating spiritual disaster purification and moved forward into a newly-born organization.

They founded the Onmyou Agency.

Along with this, the Yakou Academy also desperately needed a revival. Though the Yakou Academy had the organizational ability to train Onmyouji, the 'standalone Onmyouji' that the Yakou academy had once trained meant 'practitioners that could use first-class magic'. So, the students in the Yakou Academy at the time learned the most outstanding, strongest system of magic - Imperial Onmyoudou."

'Imperial Onmyoudou' was the foremost practical and usable system of magic that Yakou had developed at the military's request. In other words, it was magic for military use. Regardless of its strength, the recently founded Onmyou Agency couldn't designate such a magic as their official magic. That was because the most important thing to the Onmyou Agency was to rid themselves of the image of 'having once belonged to the military'. Also, since Imperial Onmyoudou was a system that a single person had founded in a short period of time, it wasn't suitable for everyone. Learning it required incredible time and effort, and most importantly, extraordinary talent.

Hence, a new system of magic replaced the Imperial style. General Onmyoudou had the simplified Imperial style as a basis, and was refined in some sense.

That was the Onmyoudou that the current Onmyou Agency used and that was taught to the students in the Onmyou Academy.

"......It doesn't train 'standalone Onmyouji' who can use first-class magic on their own, it trains Onmyouji who can use General Onmyoudou. That was the goal of the Onmyou Academy when it began. ......But--"

That was the first time worry flashed over Takiko's face.

No, Harutora wasn't confident whether it was worry or not. Her slightly gloomy expression seemed like it could be explained as a smile - a cold smile.

"That was the condition for the Yakou Academy's rebirth, as if to deny Yakou's magic from before. Because of this, infighting appeared among the people around Yakou who had founded the Yakou Academy. As a result, the Yakou Academy was split into two factions..... One of them became the current Onmyou Academy. Though it already has a long history, the Heavenly Altar at the Onmyou Academy is because of the details behind the founding of the academy. You could say that those are the 'traces' Yakou left behind at the Onmyou Academy."

After Takiko's explanation ended, she smiled kindly towards the raptly-listening Harutora and Natsume again.

They didn't know how to react at these things that they had never heard of until now. Takiko probably expected the reactions of the two of them, still keeping calm.

He didn't know what Natsume thought, but the most surprising thing to Harutora still came afterwards. "Incidentally..." Takiko added to the silent Harutora and Natsume.

"Principal Kurahashi knows about this business very clearly. After all, she was involved."

"Involved?"

"The breakout faction she led founded the current Onmyou Academy. Yakou found her when she was small, and she was one of the first members of the newly-established Yakou Academy. Though she married into the Kurahashi family after the war and left the Yakou Academy, she was made into the principal after the Onmyou Academy was established."

Harutora held his breath.

At the same time, he thought of something else. The first day he had transferred into the Onmyou Academy, the principal had told him first-hand that she had once met

Yakou. She had said he was a normal person who liked to play shogi, but who had very poor skills; someone who could cry and laugh.

According to Takiko's words, Principal Kurahashi hadn't originally been a Kurahashi family member. Instead, Yakou had noticed her and given her to the Kurahashi family for rearing. Not long after Yakou died, she married with the head of the Kurahashi family and had given birth to Kyouko's father.

After the death of her husband, Principal Kurahashi inherited leadership of the Kurahashi family and had also served as the Onmyou Academy principal. She had recommended herself to become the principal, which was enough to show her intense feelings towards the Onmyou Academy. Maybe some of that was gratitude towards Yakou, who had found her.

Just then, the elevator stopped. Harutora's group arrived in the corridor.

The shattered windows had been covered by tarps. It was day right now, so it wasn't as dark as before. The three of them walked through the corridor towards the library.

...Even so.

Harutora thought deeply again.

Who exactly was that girl called Souma Takiko?

She called herself a student, but what she had told them definitely wasn't something an ordinary student would know. Even Kyouko, who was the daughter of the principal that Takiko spoke of, probably hadn't heard about the predecessor organization to the Onmyou Academy.

...Was she really a student? Well, her age was similar to ours.....

Never mind what she had told them, her red hair and unique air were also filled with mystery.

Moreover, her personality coincided with Hokuto's.

It was inconceivable. Her rational eyes and confident actions had many features different from Hokuto. Though the way she talked was similar, it was also different. The strange reason he recalled Hokuto was probably because of her open attitude, and most importantly, the closeness she had towards Harutora and Natsume.

...Well, what I can confirm is that she's smarter than Hokuto.

Hokuto definitely wouldn't be able to calmly carry out such a lengthy, complex explanation. No, it was possible that Harutora just couldn't imagine it. In Harutora's mind, Hokuto was more prone to acting on intuition rather than reasoning, but he didn't have much confidence now.

After all.....

Harutora stared at the neck of Natsume, who walked in front of him.

The pink ribbon tied in her black hair.

"....."

Last month, suspicions that Hokuto was actually Natsume had arose in Harutora, and those hadn't disappeared yet. If he hadn't been troubled by that, he probably definitely would have asked Takiko yesterday when he met her.

The reason Takiko acted so closely, could it be.....

...I'm thinking too much..... Probably.....

In the end, Takiko had led Harutora and Natsume by the noses for the whole night. They hadn't even asked how to contact her. The two were both inadvertently stunned when they noticed afterwards that her true identity was a complete mystery. After they returned to the dorm and told Touji, he scolded them fiercely.

Harutora brainstormed, imagining Takiko's true identity.

"But....."

Touji murmured, sounding extremely annoyed.

"However I imagine it, it's better to directly ask the principal than to flip through every book in this library. For sure."

Touji's opinion was natural. But Principal Kurahashi was currently going back and forth for the academy building repair work, and the students didn't know where she was at all or what she was doing. Hence, they had visited the still-being-repaired academy building even on a vacation day, hoping to at least investigate some old information regarding the Onmyou Academy.

Natsume couldn't ignore what Takiko had told them. No matter what, they had to confirm its authenticity.

"I want to investigate what I can with my own hands."

Natsume told him her opinion again.

"If we need to get the principal, we can ask Kurahashi-san as a last resort. But the principal's quite crafty, and we'll need some information beforehand or she'll pull the wool over our eyes."

".....According to what Souma said, there weren't any records of the Yakou Academy left behind, right?"

"Those were 'official' records. But there shouldn't be none at all. It's not limited to the Yakou Academy. I think that there are definitely records and information about the founding of the Onmyou Academy..... Or things like diaries of related people."

Natsume was extremely motivated. Touji's expression tightened, his attitude quite different from her in terms of vigor. Harutora generally wasn't good at doing things like looking through books.

"......Incidentally, the fastest way to confirm would be to immediately call Souma."

"Yeah. Isn't that why I said that we didn't ask for her contact information!? I said I would treat you to a meal, so stop complaining for now!"

Touji was complaining like he rarely did, resentful that he had been lured by food. Natsume sharply had him shut his mouth. The silent Harutora knew that their lunch would be a reward for helping to investigate the information, so he didn't interrupt the conversation between his good friend and childhood friend.

Maybe Natsume was scared of meeting the principal immediately.

Natsume was rumored to be Yakou's reincarnation. Principal Kurahashi knew a lot about Yakou, and it wasn't strange to want to know right now but at the same time not want to find out. She would first investigate some information. Maybe that decision was an unexpected moment of hesitation.

But Natsume's inflated energy only continued until they actually entered the library.

"......!"

"Uwah! So this is how it was."

"Haha, that's quite the splendid destruction."

Natsume's eyes widened as she entered the library first. Harutora and Touji, who peeked over from behind her, were also so surprised that they almost laughed. The closely-packed bookshelves in the library were mostly collapsed, with the books scattered everywhere. Not only was there no place to stand, the books even piled up

to their knees. The recording numbers were extremely strange, but there were probably thousands of books.

"That Omega told us to clean up while we were at it, but seeing this, I think we won't be able to do anything unless we clean up first."

"...So the repairs would be completed by the time we finished cleaning... that kind of situation. I say we save the trouble and stop by the town, have a meal and go home."

Touji proposed this, thinking it a blessing and following right behind the dazed Harutora.

"No." But the wide-eyed Natsume immediately came to her senses, making a new decision.

"Most of the books here should be related to magic. We want to look for information related to the Onmyou Academy's history. Also, no matter how messy it got, similar information will be gathered together. We just need to find the location of the information that we want and then excavate there."

That meant it would still become excavation work at the end.

Natsume rolled up the sleeves of her uniform, wading into the jumbled sea of books and walking into the library.

The two watched her back.

"......Harutora."

"......What."

"From next time on, you have to ask for the phone number of any girl you meet for the first time."

"Understood. When I meet a girl for the first time, I'll call you over first."

Luckily, Natsume found the area where the history-related information was scattered before they ate lunch.

Immediately after, Natsume created autonomous simple shikigami. After ordering them to arrange the nearby books in the corridor, she left the academy building to treat Touji to lunch. When the three of them finished eating lunch and came back, the corridor in front of the library was filled with many books, their sheer numbers already enough to make them lose any thoughts of categorizing them. Moreover, the simple shikigami were still working. They piled up the next mountain in front of the dazed Harutora and company and returned to the library.

Natsume's cheeks momentarily twitched.

"F, For now, we should be able to speculate about the contents of the book from their titles. Just pick the ones with promising information and confirm what's inside. No problem, we'll find it quickly!"

"......That would be good if it were true."

Touji sighed with an emotionless voice.

They actually spent six hours after that.

The three of them silently immersed themselves in their mechanical, meaningless work.

After Touji, Harutora, and Kon, who had been summoned midway, even Natsume who had proposed the idea started dozing off. Moreover, the corridor became darker and darker as the sun gradually sank in the west.

After it became dark, their effectiveness decreased even though Kon released foxfire. More importantly, they didn't want to continue this kind of work after the sun set.

Kon worked in the library, and the three of them who were outside had stopped talking, going silent for quite a long time. Harutora and the others no longer even looked at each other, silently searching for information. Next to them, the simple shikigami were still adding to the mountains of books left in the corridor.

But,

"......Hmm?"

Harutora made the first sound in a while upon seeing the newly-increased mountain for information. He had already looked through all of the old information, and everything that the simple shikigami brought over now was relatively new info.

They were more like booklets rather than books. He muttered "...Oh" upon reading the title of one of them. These were the student registers of various years of the Onmyou Academy.

"Natsume, how about this? Student registers. If we find the first register, at least we'll know the names of the members of the Onmyou Academy when it was established, right?'

"......Sorry, Harutora. I investigated a long time ago..... They started making lists after the tenth class of students..... Wow, I ordered the simple shikigami to keep this kind of information for later, but it still brought these registers. It seems like there might be almost no related information left....."

"......I see....."

The dejected Harutora let out a dry laugh.

But he still unconsciously reached out and leisurely turned its pages. As a register, all it recorded were the family names of the graduating students, means of future contact, and a brief comment by the student. For something this obsolete, the contact information was probably ineffective.

"......Ah. Maybe my dad's here. I think my dad was an Onmyou Academy graduate."

"......That's pretty interesting. Let's go look."

"Hey, Harutora. Touji, too. Do this seriously."

"It's alright, we're just having some fun. ...Ah! Ohtomo-sensei should be here too. Kogure-san was in the same class, right? What class was it?"

"What was it? ...Natsume. Do you know?"

Harutora and Touji, who had already completely lost their motivation, started looking for name registers together. Natsume sighed exhaustedly, indifferently answering "The thirty-sixth".

Not long after, they found the name register of the thirty-sixth class.

"I found it, Ohtomo Jin! Damn, it would be more interesting if it had pictures!"

"Whaat, 'I had a meaningful three years' - What is this, it's so bland."

Natsume also inadvertently looked at the name register from the side upon seeing the two of them being noisy.

Just as Harutora said, the register didn't even have a group picture. It wasn't very meaningful.

But since their spirits had been in an almost dead state for a long time, it still slightly humored them. The three of them all laughed after they found the name of Kogure Zenjirou, a current Divine General.

"Ahahaha..... Well, it's about time to wrap up, Natsume. Let's stop here and go back for today. It's getting late."

Touji urged Natsume with a smile on his face. Natsume had probably laughed out her irritation, and wasn't stubborn any more, replying "Alright."

"If we can't find it like this, there's nothing we can do. We'll ask Kurahashi-san to ask the principal."

She slowly rose after replying with a cheerful expression.

But just then.

Harutora, who was still flipping through the names list, murmured "...Hmm?", his fingers stopping.

He stared intently at a page of the register.

".....What? I feel like I've seen this name somewhere before - or rather, heard. Who was it again?"

He gave the page to Natsume and Touji to look. After the two of them leaned over, he pointed it out with his finger. "This one."



'Saotome Ryou'

Unlike Harutora, the two of them instantly reacted upon seeing that name. Natsume gasped, and Touji's muttered "this person" with a solemn face.

"Ah, so you guys know?"

"......You've heard too, Harutora."

"Yeah. I felt like I had some impression. But from where?"

"......The camp before. Suzuka talked about him."

"Suzuka--"

Harutora finally thought of it.

Then, he unconsciously looked at the register again.

... 'Before me, there was another person who researched the Tsuchimikado Yakou who was widely regarded as taboo. That person carried out deep and thorough research in this field, establishing a complete system step by step by himself.'

Right. The night of the training camp, Suzuka had spoken that name in the place that Harutora's group of six had gathered.

... 'Saotome Ryou's theory was quite unique, and in his thesis - actually, more like in the notes that he transcribed - he claimed that one could use the 'Raven's Wing' to judge whether someone was Yakou's reincarnation.'

Now that he thought of it, that was also the first time Harutora learned of the Raven's Wing's existence.

"I see..... That person mentioned that we would be able to identify Yakou's reincarnation with the Raven's Wing.....!"

Harutora and Natsume's gazes were inadvertently drawn together.

Natsume's lips tightened as she stared unmovingly at the short name on the register.

Part 2

".....You've been a bit strange recently, Kyouko-san. Did something happen?"

Kyouko, who had suddenly been questioned by her grandmother on the car to the Meguro branch, turned to the side with a surprised "Eh?".

Kyouko's grandmother, Kurahashi Miyo, was the principal of the Onmyou Academy. She had a small frame but a gentle demeanor, an old lady who seemed a bit mischievous to others. Kyouko took the same car to the academy building every day with her grandmother. Since the location of the lessons had changed to the Meguro branch, the principal would first send her there before going to the academy building.

The principal sighed lightly at her granddaughter, who sat in the backseat.

"You've been staring into space for a long time. Also, you have a listless expression."

"R, Really? It's nothing....."

"Even if you can reel in boys like that, being like that to your grandmother is....."

"I'm not trying to entice you, grandma! Also, I was just thinking about things, so why did things turn into this?"

"Oh my. Though I want you to lighten up a bit, you're already quite energetic."

"You didn't want me lighten up, you were just purely bored! Yes yes, I haven't been paying attention to you, Grandma. I'm so very sorry for not saying anything."

Kyouko, who was more of the mature type in her class, would also show a childish side in front of this grandmother. Her grandmother looked with a gentle gaze at her granddaughter as she apologized irritably.

"I'm very happy that you're willing to properly keep me company. There haven't been many people able to accompany me recently."

"Father's work is very busy right now, right? He has a lot of work because it's a crucial time right now. .....Or perhaps Grandma is a bit too carefree?"

"Oh my. I'm beginning to retire now. All I'm concerned about is my cute granddaughter."

"Yes, yes, I'm extremely grateful."

The granddaughter spoke hurriedly to her laughing grandmother, somewhat embarrassed.

The Kurahashi family was a famous family in the magic community and had many troubles that only famous families had. One of these was the fact that there were very few times that the entire family could gather together. Because of this, since her father was so busy, even Kyouko could feel that her grandmother treasured the time she spent with her family.

Of course, it wasn't that nothing worried her.

"Come to think of it, I heard about the incident yesterday. You conducted mock battles with the exorcists on standby at the Meguro branch?"

".....Your ears are as sharp as always. Yeah, we did. I did participate in a mock battle. But I listened properly during class and paid attention not to impede their duties. You don't need to worry."

"Oh my, that wasn't what I was asking about. Fujiwara-sensei was there at the time, so there wouldn't be any problems in that regard. That's not it, I was asking about how the mock battle went. How was it? Kyouko-san, did you win?"

She asked excitedly. The grandmother furrowed her brow in dissatisfaction, saying "Oh my, oh my" to Kyouko who sighed and reported "I lost".

"How unfortunate. I was very much looking forward to the outcome when I heard you had a mock battle."

"Well, Grandma? The opponent was a professional exorcist, you know? Whatever you think, I couldn't have won. We're not qualified as professionals yet, we're just students."

"Well. Then, did everyone lose?"

"......Touji won. As usual, he won two straight after transforming. Natsume-kun also got a tie. I think it's because the opponent was too strong. Also, he wasn't allowed to summon his dragon. Also, Suzuka-chan didn't participate..... I, Tenma, and Harutora lost."

Kyouko dully recounted the outcome of the mock battles. If she could, she wanted to end this topic, but her grandmother still wanted to hear more details. Kyouko sighed again, unwillingly continuing her explanation.

But after explaining to her grandmother from the beginning to the end, Kyouko also realized some of her feelings.

That is to say, regarding Harutora.

The spectating exorcists were probably most surprised by Touji's transformation or Natsume's power.

But what surprised Kyouko and the others more was Harutora, as could be expected.

He hadn't used any special magic. The magic Harutora used at the time - every one - was magic that she herself knew. What's more, she had known beforehand that 'Harutora could use that magic'.

Even so, the 'magical battle' Harutora had shown was obviously different from his fighting style from before.

It was enough to call him a different person. There had been continuous surprises and amazements. She had been engrossed in his next moves, unable to move her gaze away for a moment. Even that team captain that was his opponent had been the same. She didn't know how much Harutora had noticed, but from spectating the battle on the sidelines, she saw it clearly. That team captain had been watching Harutora's moves extremely seriously, responding to them prudently yet cautiously.

...If.....

If she had fought with Harutora at that time..... She might have lost. No, it wasn't a possibility, she definitely couldn't have won.

Harutora's fighting power was very strong, that she had known long before. Moreover, she could see his growth every day.

Even so - no, it was probably because of that. Kyouko finally felt 'Harutora's current strength' after having seen the mock battle yesterday. No matter how much progress he had made, Harutora was still half an outsider, a loser who was often a dunce - she had always seen him that way, holding on to her first impression, but she had finally awoken from that.

...Yes..... That person's power had been very strong in the first place. That's why he had been able to constantly use charms like that and why he was able to use strong magic. Though his skill with magic was very low, that would keep improving in the future after constant training.....

If you asked who was more skillful with magic, right now and in the near future it was undoubtedly herself who was ahead. Kyouko was the daughter of the famous Kurahashi family, and she had been receiving special instruction since she was small.

But..... Maybe Harutora had even more of an incredible 'ability' than she did. That was what Kyouko thought after seeing yesterday's mock battle - the opposite of what she had always thought. The branch family member Harutora had also inherited the blood of Abe no Seimei's traditional Onmyoudou family, the Tsuchimikados.

...Even that person..... Is suddenly changing his direction.

The Harutora from before just had a strong spiritual power, and relied on brute force to attack. But in yesterday's mock battle, he had started to aim at the enemy's weak points for the first time. Though all of his attacks and counterattacks had been clumsy, he had already had a clear 'strategy'.

Harutora suddenly changed his style of battle. He had definitely been affected by the attack last month. After all, he had witnessed the magical battle between Ohtomo and Ashiya Doman first-hand. Judging from their topic yesterday during lunchtime, he had more or less received a very strong impact.

Seriously, as Kyouko saw it, Harutora and Touji should have found it hard to believe.

It would definitely be like that. After seeing such a shocking magical battle, most practitioners would feel indifferent emotions like 'that was special'. They wouldn't turn it around and question themselves. It was presumptuous to compare and they had nothing to reference against it. Also, even if that weren't true, they would lose the will to work hard because of how huge the difference was between them.

...Right, that guy has indeed grown, but he's inexperienced..... That's why he 'doesn't understand'.....

If you just wanted to find a path and improve yourself, you would definitely hit some kind of 'wall'. Even for someone with outstanding talent, after a certain period of time, progress would stagnate.

What kind of level could she reach? How far could she work hard for? Whether she had self-awareness or not, she had probably naturally realized it somewhere in her heart.

Then, she wouldn't compare herself with people who were far ahead of her in that regard, thinking them as 'different'. If she did, then that would give rise to ugly jealousy. Emotions like anxiety and despair would swell up.

Of course, it was another matter to be friends with and get along with someone like Suzuka. What's more, it was because she thought of Suzuka's ability and her own as 'different' that she was able to keep from holding other thoughts and get along naturally with her.

So, Harutora had definitely just failed to understand. He only had a pure desire for those dazzlingly high standards of 'ability' because he didn't know how much he had grown. In that case, Harutora really was 'half outsider'.

...But.

Kyouko had been confident she wouldn't lose to him until not long ago.

But yesterday's Harutora would definitely win against Kyouko.

Harutora and Kyouko had experienced the same amount of time and witnessed the same intense battles, but a 'discrepancy' had still arisen.

"....."

She felt very mad. That Harutora, to think he was this presumptuous.

But right afterwards, she unconsciously let a wry smile show for some reason.

Harutora's figure as he fought desperately in the mock battle reappeared in her mind. A tight mouth and a perfectly straight gaze. How should she describe it..... He truly

was a 'guy'. Then, she smiled wryly again. It seemed like she was able to understand the reason Suzuka was attracted to Harutora.

That was why. Harutora was extremely 'manly'.

Also..... When she thought about a different Tsuchimikado, sorrow passed over Kyouko's face again.

...Natsume-kun.....

The boy Kyouko liked. She had started liking him since she was small, and many things had happened since they reunited, but as expected, she still liked him..... yearned for him.....

But now, there was something Kyouko was very concerned about.

It had started from the incident last month. At the time - everyone had been surrounded by Doman's shikigami and Natsume had fought seriously. He had seriously protected Kyouko and his companions with all of his strength. Thinking back, that was the first time Kyouko had seen the 'serious Natsume' with her own eyes. She had seen the undisguised Natsume first-hand.

But the Natsume from that time was different from normal. That didn't mean his desperation or how powerful he was..... It was something else that was different. Some feeling of wrongness.

Of course, Kyouko hadn't been in a normal condition at the time. Natsume wasn't the one to talk about if you were talking about desperation. So she had thought it was her own mistake.

But in the mock battle yesterday, Kyouko had felt the same feeling of wrongness from Natsume again for a moment. She thought of it. Various scenes from before, several flakes that she hadn't been concerned about and missed.

"......Hah."

Kyouko unconsciously closed her eyes. She cleared her mind, resetting her thoughts.

She didn't understand the true identity of the feeling of wrongness. She unconsciously avoided thinking about it. She didn't want to know the answer and she was unwilling to think. She was scared.

Because of this, she been a bit stiff with Natsume recently. Though it was fortunate that Natsume hadn't felt anything at all..... It still wasn't a good inclination.

...What should I do?

Since Harutora had entered the academy, Kyouko had begun feeling frustrated about her personal relationships.

"......Kyouko-san?"

The principal called out to her upon seeing Kyouko go silent at some point. Kyouko came back to her senses. She turned her head, looking at the eyes that had protected her since she had been small gazing at her as if they could see through the depths of her heart.

Kyouko was distraught. But her grandmother didn't say any unnecessary words to her granddaughter who was like that.

"We've arrived already. Do your best today as well."

She hastily looked outside. The car was already stopped next to the Meguro branch. Kyouko didn't dare to meet her grandmother's gaze. Expressing thanks to her grandmother for asking nothing at all, she said:

"I-I'm off."

She lightly left those words and opened the door to leave the car.

...Really. Get a grip!

Kyouko urged herself as she watched the car speed away. She straightened her back and walked into the branch.

She checked the location of her first class from the bulletin board by the entrance. It was in the second meeting room. Right now, she had already memorized the locations of the various meeting rooms, so she didn't need to go look carefully at the room map. She greeted the bureau members who passed by her, walking into the second meeting room with steady steps.

When she entered the room, most of the students were present, including Harutora, Natsume, Touji, and most of the dorm residents.

The three of them also noticed Kyouko. Harutora said "Yo. Good morning.". As Kyouko also greeted him, she unconsciously peeked at Natsume's expression.

But before Kyouko and Natsume spoke to each other:

"Kyouko. Are you free after school today?"

After they greeted each other, Harutora asked this of Kyouko. "Eh?" Kyouko's attention returned to Harutora.

"I am free..... what is it? Could it be that you're going to try getting into another mock battle?"

"No, no. It's something else this time."

Harutora shook his head, smiling.

"I wanted to go on a hospital visit. For our homeroom teacher."

Part 3

".....So in short, that Yakou researcher called Saotome Ryou whom Suzuka spoke of before was actually Ohtomo-sensei's classmate?"

"That's right. That's the only thing we got after spending an entire Sunday. It's a feeling like going into a ramen store and all they have is curry."

Harutora shrugged his shoulders at Kyouko's confirmation.

The sun set at a later time every day.

It was after classes had ended. Harutora and the others were riding the train to Ueno during what was called the evening, though the sun was still bright.

Actually, he had already visited Ohtomo before. When Ohtomo's condition stabilized, he had gone to thank him for his assistance during the attack. But Ohtomo had transferred to a hospital in Ueno after that.

The people who went to visit him this time, outside of Harutora, were Natsume, Touji, Kyouko, Tenma, and Suzuka, six people in total. But visiting was actually just an excuse. Their true goal was to hear about information related to Saotome Ryou. Of course, though they had heard they were classmates, he might not know any detailed information, but they might as well ask and see first.

Also, they planned on questioning Ohtomo about whether he knew anything regarding the Onmyou Academy history they had learned from Takiko. But they didn't expect much in this regard. Ohtomo had originally been a Mystical Investigator, and he didn't have much experience as a teacher. As expected, the key person in the relationship between the Onmyou Academy and the Yakou Academy was Principal Kurahashi.

".....In that case, you should have contacted me yesterday by email or something else. I was with Grandma today morning, you know?"

"Sorry, Kurahashi-san. I thought it would be better to speak with you face-to-face because I thought that it would be hard to meet with the principal immediately and because the topic is also rather complex."

Natsume spoke apologetically. Kyouko hastily waved her hands in alarm. "No, it's no problem, Natsume-kun!"

She had conveyed what Souma Takiko had said to her to Kyouko, Tenma, and Suzuka during lunchtime. But just as she, Harutora, and Touji had anticipated, this was also the first time Kyouko had heard about it.

"Now that you mention it, Grandma kind of evaded the question about the altar on the roof. I'm also interested in how specifically it's related to Tsuchimikado Yakou. I'll have to question Grandma carefully."

"Thanks for the help." After hearing Kyouko's reliable words, Harutora expressed his thanks.

Then, Tenma said "Uh," as if he had thoughts.

"But that girl called Souma is very interesting. Is she really a student?"

"Yeah. If the Onmyou Academy were in its normal condition, we could find some related worker and ask....."

"What about Alpha and Omega? Harutora-kun, have you guys asked whether they know about that girl?"

"Ah." Harutora raised his voice as if he had thought of something in response to Tenma's inadvertently-made proposal.

"That's right! Those two guys should probably know if she's a student. Damn, I should have asked them."

"Yeah, I think that's a good idea. But I bet they don't know anything."

"Huh? Why?"

"Intuition."

"Intuition, huh."

"Anyway, I haven't seen her."

Touji stuck his hands in his pockets, replying coldly.

"But considering what I heard about that girl's attitude to the two of you, she would definitely have approached you earlier if she were a student and went to the academy every day. There would always be an opportunity for some kind of reason. Even as a chance encounter, it's too unnatural to happen to meet a classmate for the first time on the academy roof at night as it's being repaired."

"There's also the possibility that she's a new student who just entered this year."

"There's one new student who entered this year who made a declaration in front of all the students on the first day and viciously disrupted your lives. In the end, she's walking with you guys right now."

"Hmph." After hearing the matter that Touji casually pointed out, Suzuka, who walked ahead and to the side of them, narrowed her eyes and looked back, her long ponytails swaying.

Maybe Suzuka had tried to approach Harutora and Natsume with all her might since the start, but had been set back for some unexpected reason. Well, he was probably overthinking it.

Harutora felt that the opportunity was right.

"Suzuka. Are there any new students with red hair among the first-years?"

"How would I know. I have no interest in the other students."

"......I guess."

"Rather than that. I was listening just now, did you mention Saotome? I'm more interested in that."

The six of them had discussed it, but Suzuka was the one who understood Saotome most clearly. More accurately, the others just knew the information that Suzuka had told them. But even Suzuka had only understood Saotome from the research he had left behind.

"Though I knew he was an Onmyou Academy graduate..... That was too vague. There are so many Onmyou Academy graduates in this line of work."

According to the explanation they had heard from Suzuka before, Saotome had once been a member of the now shut-down Imperial Household Agency Lingering Spirit Division. He had been a subordinate of Suzuka's father Dairenji Shidou, who was the culprit of the spiritual disaster attack two years ago. But it was uncertain whether he was a member of the Twin-Horned Syndicate like Dairenji Shidou. He had disappeared without a trace before the Mystical Investigators inspected and dissolved and finally shut down the Lingering Spirit Division. Of course, he hadn't been heard from since.

"Well, we don't know if they had any contact after graduating, even if they were classmates. I don't think Ohtomo could possibly know what Saotome's doing now. I was just a researcher, and had a pure interest in my fellow researcher Saotome. What kind of person is he..... But I kind of feel like the only answer I could get is 'who knows'."

Suzuka put her hands behind her head, speaking listlessly. She was probably anticipating what kind of result there would be.

Actually, he probably wouldn't be able to answer with much if someone asked him about the situation of anyone from middle or elementary school. Other than several people he had been close with, all he had known about others were their names.

Moreover,

".....It seems like Ohtomo-sensei wouldn't have many friends....."

Harutora also inadvertently expressed his approval after hearing Kyouko mutter quietly. Kogure, who was in the same class, had a very wide friend group.

Harutora secretly peeked at the expression of Natsume next to him.

Natsume probably wanted to know more about information regarding Saotome than Suzuka did. To Natsume, who might be Yakou's reincarnation, Saotome, who was more knowledgeable about Yakou's personal information, had to be someone she wanted to meet. In particular, Saotome had proposed that using the 'Raven's Wing' could judge whether someone was Yakou's reincarnation. She wanted to at least confirm its authenticity.

The Onmyou Academy kept the genuine Raven's Wing, but it had been taken away by Natsume's father before Ashiya Doman had attacked. Natsume's father was an outstanding diviner, and he had predicted Doman's attack - or at least the danger of exposing the Raven's Wing - and had moved it to a different place beforehand.

Actually, Natsume hadn't asked her father about anything related to the Raven's Wing.

If she could, Natsume didn't want to contact her father, whom she didn't have a very good relationship with. 'Use the Raven's Wing to ascertain the truth' - Saotome's idea was too ambiguous and lacking in evidence.

But if she could find information related to Saotome - especially if she could get a hold on the clues in front of her...

In that case, maybe she could meet with Saotome herself.

"....."

Natsume walked on the road. Not much could be seen from her face. Harutora gave up, unconsciously looking towards the sky.

Just then, the horn of a car suddenly sounded towards the walking Harutora.

Their group stopped and turned towards the road. The car driving on the other side of the road deliberately made a U-turn to approach the sidewalk where Harutora and the others were.

The car stopped next to them. It was a small car, an old model Mini Cooper. It was painted black from end to end, and the windows were shaded. A black Mini.

The passenger-side car window rolled down--

"...What are you doing here?"

"Huh? Senpai?"

A neat, doll-like face, expressionless like a mask, looked at Harutora from the car window. No interest of the speaker could be felt from the voice that spoke to Harutora and the gaze that looked at Harutora.

She was the third-year Onmyou Academy senpai that Harutora knew. Though he ran into her very infrequently, every time he did, she left behind unforgettable impacts.

"How rare, you're riding a car. Senpai, what are you in Ueno for?"

"Inviting Kon-chan to go for a spin."

".....Could you answer questions seriously, even just occasionally?"

"Don't worry, I'll return her in the evening."

"That's not the problem!"

"If the price isn't too high--"

"That's even less of a problem!"

Though this was a bicker completely the same as before, the people around them were inadvertently dazed. Come to think of it, of the people here, only Touji had met the senpai.

Harutora hastily turned back around.

"Ah, I'll introduce her. Natsume, I talked with you before, right? 'That' senpai. .....Ahh, her name's Suzu."

The senpai Harutora introduced stuck her head out of the window, succinctly saying "nice to meet you". Of course, she was still expressionless as if she were sleepy. Harutora's group, starting with Natsume, nodded as if they didn't know how to respond to this senpai who greeted them. But - not unexpectedly - the senpai seemed completely unaffected by her kouhais' strange reactions.

"Should I introduce these guys too? You met Touji before, right? Next is--"

"I know. Tsuchimikado Natsume, Kurahashi Kyouko, Dairenji Suzuka, Glasses."

"Ah, so you knew them. Well, they're pretty famous in the academy."

".....H, Hey, Harutora-kun? What about me?"

Tenma, who had been called 'Glasses', protested silently. Harutora hastily introduced Tenma, though he didn't know whether the senpai was seriously listening.

She looked at everyone with a blank gaze that they couldn't figure out the target of. When her gaze focused on Suzuka, she stopped for a moment.

What was she doing? Suzuka, feeling a bit suspicious, furrowed her brows. "What?" The senpai stared at her.

"......How unfortunate."

"......Uwah, I completely know what senpai means. It looks like you've fallen pretty far."

"How rude. Call it enlightenment."

"It's a completely depraved direction."

Come to think of it, she might be the only person he could bicker so impolitely with. To think this kind of person was his senpai. What a sad fact.

As if losing her temper at the rude attitude of her kouhai, the senpai - no expression on her face, like always - seemed to get mad with a "hmph".

She frowned slightly.

"What a declaration of a winner. I hate that kind of gaze that looks down on others."

"Hah? How am I the winner?"

"Because you're the owner....."

"Oh. You mean Kon. .....No, I know, but....."

"How envious. So hateful. The winner's lack of self-awareness, the owner's arrogance."

"What's wrong? Am I thinking too much, or are you even more annoying than normal today?"

"If you don't have a little girl, you can dearly love your own shikigami. That's discrimination against those who don't have them--"

"Enough is enough, Senpai."

The senpai, her hands on the window frame, got more and more vigorous as she spoke. Harutora mercilessly reprimanded her again.

But she wasn't as energetic as usual this time. Had something happened? Perhaps something hateful had happened, or her expectations had been dashed.

Unexpectedly,

"Let me go on a date with her!"

"Why are you getting angry! Come to think of it, why are you upset! Also, I won't permit that!"

The fact that the topic couldn't progress even if he uncharacteristically negated her hadn't changed. But though Harutora had asked 'what have you come to Ueno for', he didn't really want to know the answer.

But he really was very interested in this car. After all, there wouldn't be only one person in the car. Actually, the senpai sat in the passenger seat of the Mini. Someone else drove.

He still hadn't seen Senpai with anyone else. Driven by his curiosity, Harutora peeked into the driver's seat from the passenger side window.

The person driving the car was a black-suited man wearing sunglasses. He was extremely bland, - or rather, his extreme lack of individuality bothered him. The people next to him were having a stupid conversation, but he didn't even look away from what was in front of him.

"He's a shikigami. He's just driving."

His hair stood on end momentarily.

The voice came from the backseat. There was one more passenger. However, he hadn't noticed at all before he heard that voice. His thoughts froze, and only his eyes reflexively turned to the backseat.

"....Th, That's weird.....?"

After seeing the person who had spoken, his stiff body relaxed. A small boy sat in the very narrow backseat of the Mini.

A scary elementary schooler, probably. His clothes were very neat, and he wore an old-styled suit and cropped slacks. He wore a bowtie and sunglasses.



Sunglasses as red as blood.

His body below his head didn't move at all. He faced Harutora with just a fearless smile emerging on his face:

"It's good to see you well. Since last time, you seem a little - Mgah!?"

The senpai suddenly reached out her arm from the passenger seat, covering the boy's face with her palm.

Grabbing his face like that, she said:

"Shut up."

She forcefully pushed him into the backseat.

The boy made an ambiguous sound of resistance, and the senpai said "Oho" in a cold, emotionless voice, mercilessly increasing the pressure. The fact that she was expressionless for the whole time was even more terrifying. Harutora was dumbfounded.

"......Uh, Hold on, wh-what.....?"

"Don't worry."

"How could I not worry!?"

"This is just a kind of game. Because, look. This guy isn't resisting, right?"

Actually, the boy whose mouth was being covered seemed to very much want to say something, but he couldn't resist with his slightly raised limbs alone. Rather than being unable to move, it seemed more like his limbs didn't have much vitality in the first place..... It was indeed a bit slapstick, like a joke. Whether it was at all entertaining was a different matter.

"Wh, Who is that? This kid?"

"Trash."

"No no no! It's really scary if you say it like that!"

"You could also call him a disappointment."

"I said, don't say that kind of thing to kids! Also, your voice shouldn't be that cold, right? It feels like you're saying that for real or something!?"

Just then, the boy gave up on shouting. He closed his mouth, as if he wanted to express humility, constantly bowing his head towards the senpai. After the senpai stared at the boy for a moment, she silently took her hand off his mouth.

The boy breathed in deeply with a 'haaah'.

"What a girl..... Just wait until I recover completely, you'll see."

"I told you to shut up and not talk. It was your fault."

"To begin with, that kind of order - No, wait. I got it. I'll shut up."

The boy frantically shut his mouth just as the senpai leaned over.

Harutora stood still blankly, unable to say anything. The chill and doubts that had arisen after he heard the boy's voice had blown away somewhere. Of course, Natsume and the others who watched from behind didn't understand what they were talking about either.

"Senpai! Tell me seriously, who exactly is this kid!? What exactly is going on?"

"I'm inviting Kon-chan to--"

"Enough!"

The senpai seemed to feel helpless at the loudly-rebuking Harutora, coldly announcing "He's a relative's kid".

"I'm looking after him now because of some annoying business. I brought this guy here today because he had to see someone no matter what. But unfortunately, since he was already 'booked', we could only go back and wait for another opportunity."

After the senpai explained, she made a silent request towards the backseat. Noticing this, the boy nodded very unwillingly to express agreement.

".....Someone he wanted to meet? This guy? But you couldn't meet him?"

Harutora repeated, a bit befuddled. The senpai gazed dully into Harutora's eyes, nodding and saying "yeah". He feared that she would do the same thing even if she were lying straight to his face, so it was hard to believe.

But,

".....Honestly, it's good."

The senpai quietly added that sentence, her gaze not directed towards Harutora, but seeming directed towards some faraway place. This was Harutora's first time seeing such an expression. He became interested with an "Ohh".

But it didn't continue for long.

"Anyway, our business is done and we still have time. So Kon-chan--"

"Leave."

"You have no pity? Where's your love and compassion for a have-not--"

"I have none."

The senpai clicked her tongue dissatisfiedly. Maybe she had done this to divert the topic, but unfortunately, it was difficult to rationally explain this senpai's actions.

Harutora secretly looked at the boy sitting in the back again.

The boy's mouth was curved into a reluctant へ. His expression seemed very haughty, maybe since he was wearing sunglasses.

But his face didn't look too good. Rather than being pale, one could say that he didn't have much vitality, and his complexion didn't resemble a child's. Though his voice and words had a strong personality, once he closed his mouth and sat still, he looked like a childish mannequin - or to put it a bit nastily, he looked like a specimen that had been soaked in formaldehyde to some degree. When Harutora thought of his limb movements from just now, he feared that he might have some illness.

"......Senpai. Is that kid alright?"

"Head? Body? Or both?"

"No, well....."

"You don't have to restrict yourself to any area. Because his entire person has problems."

"Hey you, even though he's a kid, what position are you in to belittle others that much?"

"It's alright. This guy's problems are alright, given his circumstances."

"I can't understand what you're saying at all."

"Can't understand?"

"What?"

"Even for this kid, after putting on a wig and wearing a skirt--"

"Is he really a relative!? You didn't kidnap some child, right!?"

Though he had felt some sort of danger since a long time ago, it had never been filled with this sense of realism. He might suddenly see his worst premonition on the news someday in a mosaicked senpai.

Then, whether it was to try to get a word in or because he felt that the conversation was stupid:

"Suzu."

The boy behind him let out a pressing voice. The senpai looked over her shoulder momentarily to glare fiercely at him, but she very quickly turned back to face Harutora.

"We're leaving."

"......You're as incoherent as always."

With her words as a signal, the simple shikigami in the driver's seat released the hand brake. Harutora only realized now who was controlling the simple shikigami. Because it couldn't really be the boy, it was Senpai. But did Senpai have a driver's license? He was suddenly very worried, but he was afraid of asking her to her face.

The senpai rolled the car window up. The black Mini slowly started moving.

But just as the Mini was about to leave.

"Say hello to that brat for me. ...Fwah!?"

The boy broke his silence again, and the senpai immediately turned around to sanction him. Then, as they kept those postures, the Mini sped away on the road. Harutora's temple twitched as he watched the Mini slowly growing distant.

"......Are there really no problems? In various areas....."

Then, he turned backwards as if he thought of something. Just like he had predicted, Natsume, Touji, Kyouko, Tenma, and Suzuka's gazes were clearly inquisitive and focused on Harutora to the level where Harutora even felt like they were audible.

Natsume opened her mouth to represent everyone.

"......So, what?"

Would he be able to explain it clearly before they reached the hospital? Harutora smiled wryly while wracking his brains over where to start.

Part 4

The hospital Ohtomo was staying in - or more accurately, a clinic with beds - was mixed into a residential street that looked like private housing at first glance.

The rooms were single occupancy, and when they passed through the wood-framed glass doors, they could see the Japanese Red Pine and Baby's Breath that were planted in the courtyard. The rotating electric fan gave off faint whirring noises, and right now they were also using a CRT television. There was folk art mounted on the wall for display. This wasn't for the patients, but rather it was the hospital manager's interest. The meow of a cat occasionally sounded, and short-tailed wild cats leisurely crossed the courtyard under the warm summer sun.

A normal and uninteresting hospital life.

But, a rare visitor had appeared in the hospital room today. A hale and hearty old man who wore a sharp Armani suit.

The first thing he said when he came to the patient was:

"What. Rather than being hospitalized, you seem more like you've been living here for a while."

He had no choice but to respond with a smile. To Ohtomo, he was a former boss. He was the Magical Crime Investigation Department Chief, Amami Daizen.

"Don't say such misleading words. I was hovering on the line between life and death for a while, you know."

"Sleeping won't heal your white hair."

"I'm not talking about the white hair. It was the heavy spiritual encumbrance and the even harsher mental pain."

Ohtomo sat up on the bed, frowning and returning words. Amami, who sat on a stool, laughed "haha", fanning with the fan in his hand.

The hospitalized Ohtomo was as leisurely as before. But his hair had turned completely white, proof of his magic battle with Ashiya Doman. Of course, that was just an obvious change to his appearance, the easiest to see.....

"......Hm."

Amami narrowed his eyes, looking aggressively at the bedridden Ohtomo.

"The curse has essentially been completely removed..... But you really were hit in an essential place. For the time being, complete recovery is..... But....."

"......Well, a complete recovery should be impossible. Just like my right leg, what's cut off won't grow back."

Ohtomo shrugged his shoulders lightly.

Spiritual encumbrance was spiritual injury. Most was caused from people with little tolerance coming in contact with the miasma from spiritual disasters. The aura carried by the body was disturbed, causing physical and psychological harm.

But if it were just of the level of disturbed aura, magic treatment could restore it very quickly, and it would even naturally recover after a period of time. However, if spiritual encumbrance became more serious, the spiritual body would receive damage, which was incurable. Depending on the extent, some conditions couldn't even be cured by professional Onmyou doctors.

Of course, it was very rare for someone to receive spiritual encumbrance that serious. But situations like receiving damage from spiritual disasters or from attacks of other practitioners were another matter. Especially the latter - also known as curses. A

magic that was used from the start to cause the opponent to suffer spiritual encumbrance dealt quite some damage.

In the battle last month, Ohtomo's body had endured Doman's magic several times. Of course, though he had offset them, the opponent's magical energy was greater than his. Moreover, Ohtomo had prioritized attacking over defending himself. The cost of this was the severe spiritual encumbrance Ohtomo received.

Though Ohtomo was wearing a bathrobe for sleeping in right now, there were dozens of healing charms wrapped in place by bandages beneath his clothing. Moreover, in the end these were just palliative, and most of them were used to hasten the recovery of his spiritual power, which was in a depleted state. It was impossible for him to completely return to his state before. He had learned of that bad news from the mouth of the Onmyou doctor who was this place's hospital manager himself.

Even so, Ohtomo was still cheerful.

"When my right leg was injured, it let me resign from the Mystical Investigators, but it seems that this won't let me resign from being a teacher. So at least it should let me happily rest without a care for some time. Well, after this I'll give the annoying business to the students, and all I should need to do is leisurely watch from behind them."

He bent his body on the bed, light reflecting off the lenses of his glasses as he spoke slovenly. Amami couldn't help but smile wryly, snorting as he said "What nonsense are you saying".

"Physical and spiritual wounds should be an 'advantage' to a practitioner. You were once a Mystical Investigator, so that should be common knowledge."

"Uwah. How barbaric. That's the unreasonable view of the last era."

"Hah. Unfortunately, no matter how you hide it, magic is a thing of the last era, and being a Mystical Investigator is an unreasonable profession. .....Ask yourself. After you lost your right leg, did you become weaker?"

For example, in an ancient 'soul-calling' ritual from the northeast, a shaman would summon the souls of the dead to communicate with. This ritual had originally been classified as a kind of second-class magic of General Onmyoudou, and it was known that the ones who cast the 'soul-calling magic', called 'itako', possessed strong spiritual power. But - at least it had been so before - 'itako' were mostly all blind or were said to be visually impaired.

The origin of that example was that because the eyes couldn't see, the ability to 'see' became stronger and spirit-seeing would thus be honed. That saying was deeply ingrained into even the Onmyou Agency. In other words, spiritual power and magical energy were supplemented by defects of the body.

In addition, other than physical loss like having one eye, one arm, or one leg, spiritual injury could lead to strengthened spiritual power. That way of thinking was spread among the old type of Onmyouji. Needless to say, Onmyou regulation strictly prohibited the actual practice. But very few of the Onmyouji working 'on-site' denied that view.

"Selection and specialization doesn't just apply to the business world. Maybe it's also accompanied by 'grief'."

Amami closed the fan in his hand with a snap, smiling playfully with a wicked gaze.

Even so, in the end this was just one side of the story. Even if they could prove statistically that those who were wounded were stronger, it was more reasonable to think that 'those who experience more severe battles' get wounded and also grow because of it.

"Well, what's important is that all that information is very far-fetched. I'm injured, you know, so I can't move or listen to your complaints. Let me rest peacefully."

Ohtomo stuck out his chest, speaking foolishly. Amami smiled wryly again.

"What I wanted to emphasize was there are a lot of people who receive injuries and still stay on the frontlines. You were originally pretending to be retired, but you'll get bored with it and stick your neck into trouble very quickly anyway."

Amami raised the fan in front of him, declaring as if he had seen through everything. Ohtomo revealed a resentful expression.

"......Honestly, this old man and old lady."

"Old lady? Oh, Miyo-chan. I see, so you heard similar things from Miyo-chan."

"Oh my? I just said 'old lady', I didn't say who it was. No wonder you're the Chief of the Mystical Investigators, your insight is on a different level. Let me obediently tell these to the principal--"

"Uwah, no no no no! That's not cool at all!"

Panicked, Amami stopped Ohtomo's monologue. Ohtomo knew that the Mystical Investigator Chief and the Onmyou Academy Principal were associated, but hence he could see where the real power balance was.

"......Come to think of it, Miyo-chan might have put shikigami in this hospital room."

"What!? P-Please don't say such terrifying things. That's terrible!"

"To be honest, I think that it was a bit better when you were working under me....."

"......But just 'a bit', huh..... What a hateful industry."

Ohtomo whined listlessly, his gaze hovering over the door to the hospital room. Maybe he was truly very worried. Come to think of it, there had been cats in the courtyard just now, he muttered with a look full of suspicion.

On the other hand, at some point a smile had shown itself on Amami's face as he watched Ohtomo.



"......But."

Moving his gaze from Ohtomo's head of white hair, he opened his mouth to speak lamentfully.

"I didn't think you would be able to drive that Ashiya Doman back."

The eccentric Amami very rarely expressed sincere and undisguised respect. Even Ohtomo, who replied immediately no matter how troublesome the words were, went speechless for a moment at Amami talking to himself, taking an embarrassed expression.

"......It wasn't a victory in a magic battle. It was just a 'competition of magic'. The opponent probably just saw it as carefree 'playing with a kid', right? Also, he didn't bring a single retainer with him, because he was using them all to attack the Onmyou Academy building. Most importantly, it was Kogure who beat him at the end....."

"Haha. Don't be shy, don't be shy. That just shows your power."

"......Hah. What simple flattery....."

"Oh oh, right. I bought this but almost forgot. Here, a get-well gift. A luxurious fruit basket."

"Uwah. You even used such a pretty basket - no, could this be, did you buy this from that Ginza nightclub that you always go to?"

"Oh, you understand very well. It was very expensive. Thank me properly."

"I should be thanking the girls in the store, right? Really, what a bad taste..... Even if you tell me to eat it....."

He received a fruit basket large enough to wrap his arms around, putting it on the table next to his bed.

Immediately afterwards, Ohtomo adjusted his glasses:

"...So?"

He changed the topic.

"Though I'm very grateful to receive such a beautiful thing, we should be about getting to the main topic, right? What exactly has happened to cause the Chief to take the trouble to come here?"

"Huh. Did you not hear about it from Miyo-chan?"

"Just a bit. .....Has the Onmyou legal reform bill passed yet or not?"

Ohtomo changed his tone and confirmed.

"...Yeah." Amami lightly nodded and replied. Though his words were very light, it felt like they contained various thoughts and feelings.

The Onmyou Agency had formulated Onmyou law in the first year after it was established - almost half a century ago now.

At the time, the Onmyouji had been anxious to deal with spiritual disasters. They had to systematize the organization and had not hesitated to apply large-scale reform to the Onmyou Bureau. In order to let the magic community, which had a tenuous connection with society, embed itself in Japanese society, they had cut some corners. The first step was regulation of magic and practitioners. This way, the magic community, which was burdened by ancient 'darkness' from before the war, shone with the light of the law in front of others and became spotless.

The Onmyou law that was formulated after this was still regulating and controlling the magic community.

But the basic tenets of the current law supported 'stable purification of spiritual disasters'.

Current Onmyou Law was defined extremely haphazardly and restricted difficult-to-classify magic for the most-important goal of purifying spiritual disasters. A large part of the reason was that the Onmyou Bureau, the Onmyou Agency's predecessor, had belonged to the old Imperial Army. Needless to say, Onmyouji and practitioners were all unknown entities in the eyes of most people. In order to obtain a public place for themselves, they had to simplify and clarify the industry, no matter what.

Even now, the locations of current Onmyouji activity were limited to certain parts of society for this. Though they had succeeded in defining the 'image of an Onmyouji' in the new society, the magic community itself was still isolated from other industries.

It was the Onmyou Agency's deepest desire to break through that closed-off condition. The main target of the Onmyou legal reform that was expected to pass in Congress was to widen the scope of Onmyoujis' responsibilities. In other words, they planned to allow Onmyouji to enter society.

".....I don't know what it'll turn into in the end..... Well, I, who elegantly retired from the plan, am not too involved."

"How ignorant. Youngster, you'll starve sooner or later if you don't have work."

Amami coldly put reality in front of him. Ohtomo curved his mouth into a '∧' shape at his former boss's unhumorous accusation.

"Well. The real problem is that we won't be able to widen the scope of responsibilities when the Exorcist Bureau is in a crisis of insufficient manpower, even if we wanted to. This amendment is actually just strengthening the authority and expanding the budget of the Exorcist Bureau - and even the Onmyou Agency as a whole."

".....Dreaming of the so-called Onmyou 'province', huh."

"We'll think of extending it to that level later. But the large-scale spiritual disaster terrorist actions from two years ago until this spring started to cause chaos for society. Also, attacks on the Onmyou Agency and the Onmyou Academy just happened. The public eye has started to notice Onmyouji now..... More accurately, they feel very threatened. It'll be troublesome if Onmyouji can't be active when we expect them to be. So, the politicians are playing out an active discussion and the bill passed smoothly."

But, Amami lowered his voice slightly. His gaze also became sharp.

".....But we have to continue being careful of the Onmyou Agency's desires."

"Careful?"

"Yeah. More accurately, never mind the problems of the strengthened authority of the Onmyou Agency or who leads it. The Onmyou Agency obviously wants to lead itself, but the reform this time is so big that other agencies want to come and interfere. In order to keep those guys quiet, we obviously need to keep 'achievement' in the leaders' hands. .....Well, though it seems like it should be other people's business, I also attended the meeting. After all, spiritual disasters won't cooperate with us and appear, and we can't purify anything, so we can only aim at other targets."

Amami stared intently at Ohtomo's eyes, hinting at something. Ohtomo realized what the meaning in Amami's words was, replying to him with a serious expression.

".....The Twin-Horned Syndicate?"

"Right. Thankfully, some academy teacher sealed the enemy's wild card 'D'. How can we pass up this opportunity? We're going to do it thoroughly this time and include the people on the inside. Needless to say, the inside is the important part. An

investigation of the darkness inside the agency is already going on. We're going to smoke them out without leaving a single one."

Amami's voice was very flat, but at the same time it felt very motivated. If expanding the scope of Onmyouji responsibility was the will of the Onmyou Agency, then cleaning up the Twin-Horned Syndicate was the necessary desire of the Mystical Investigators.

"......I fear this will become my final job."

"Chief?"

Ohtomo couldn't conceal his surprise upon hearing that unexpected remark.

But Amami smiled firmly.

"Sorry. Elegantly retiring goes in order of age. Enjoy your rare vacation. There will still be burdens left for the new system, so you can't sit back and relax without a care. ...But, what I came here for today is closely related to hunting the Twin-Horned Syndicate. We're going to go on that attack this time, and of course we've considered their resistance. The probability that they do everything possible to do something to you or your students at the time isn't zero. But. This time, we're sending guards from the Onmyou Agency. So, you can sleep and rest properly. I just came here to tell you about this."

"....."

The stunned Ohtomo floundered, unable to speak. Amami chuckled, opening his fan again.

"......Who's the guard? Is it a Mystical Investigator you can 'trust'?"

"Don't joke around. I'm still choosing. Honestly, I really want it to be someone like Kogure..... But we need the Exorcist Bureau to act for the job this time too. We have

to paralyze the organization temporarily, and that youngster who can purify spiritual disasters alone can't easily leave the scene. .....That guy's confinement was just lifted in the first place."

"Confinement? What did he do?"

"Oho. When we were dealing with the attack on the Onmyou Agency, he abandoned his original duty and left for the frontlines. Moreover, he even took his squad. If he hadn't defeated Ashiya Doman, it definitely wouldn't have been simple confinement. I wonder who exactly tricked him."

Amami laughed happily, and Ohtomo hastily whistled and feigned ignorance.

In any case, the Twin-Horned Syndicate wouldn't calmly wait to be hunted. Though they couldn't make any fearless movements with just the members they had left, it was possible that they would get entangled with Tsuchimikado Natsume - rumored to be the reincarnation of Tsuchimikado Yakou, the object of their fanaticism - if they were backed into a corner. This aspect required adequate consideration.

In comparison, the current Onmyou Academy was by no means safe. Ohtomo couldn't relax if they didn't have any highly-skilled and trustworthy guards.

Just then, Ohtomo and Amami tilted their heads in unison.

The two of them had keenly noticed a presence. Not long after Amami muttered ".....Guests?", the noise of many footsteps approaching the hospital room from the corridor sounded.

Noisy voices rang out.

Amami realized who the visitors were. He closed his fan, saying "how interesting".

Immediately after,

"Ah, is it here? Sensei, sorry to bother--"

The door was slowly opened, and the faces of six academy students appeared.



At the start, they hadn't been able to find this hospital and had wandered around the complex alleys for a long time.

"I didn't think the outside would be such an ordinary residence....."

"Is the principal too stingy?"

"Hey, quiet, Grandma wouldn't be cheap for such a thing."

"This kind of place isn't bad, the aura is extremely stable."

"Alright, let's go in."

"E, Everyone, this place is a hospital, so please be a bit quiet."

Harutora walked in front of them, bringing a noisy group of people into the corridor.

Though all of the entrances of the clinic had information desks, the more they went inside the more it looked like a house. Actually, it had probably been made like a residence. Harutora and the others walked through the narrow corridors in rows.

"Ah, is it here? Sensei, sorry to bother--"

Harutora greeted the person inside while slowly opening the door.

Ohtomo, who sat on the bed, replied "Oh" after seeing Harutora. Harutora saw the rare sight of Ohtomo in a bathrobe. His head of white hair still felt unnatural.

But what surprised Harutora was that there was another guest who had already arrived in the room.

The guest wore a suit, so he probably wasn't a doctor here. He was an old man as skinny as a crane, but his spine was very straight as he sat, as if there were a ruler attached to his back. After seeing his face, Harutora greeted him with "Ah, hello" somewhat warily. The old man showed a unique smile to Harutora and the others.

"It's been a long time, Kyouko-chan and Dairenji. It's probably my first time meeting the rest of you."

Harutora uttered "huh" after hearing the old man's words, turning around to look at Kyouko and Suzuka. He saw Kyouko, who had walked in after him, with her eyes widened in surprise, but Suzuka showed a displeased look as if she were a wild cat that had spotted a guard dog.

"Amami-san! What's wrong, why are you here?"

"Kyouko, someone you know?"

"Yeah, kind of. Amami-san is the Mystical Investigators' chief."

After hearing Kyouko's introduction, Harutora, Natsume, Touji, and Tenma all hastily turned around to look at the old man. Amami smiled at them and said "You don't need to be too formal". His attitude and manner of speech were straightforward, even graceful.

"I've heard of you guys. I'm Amami of the Mystical Investigators, pleasure to meet you."

"I-It's our pleasure... to meet you..... B-But, why is the chief of the Mystical Investigators here?"

The Mystical Investigator Chief was a higher-up of the Onmyou Agency. Upon seeing Harutora's flustered appearance, Suzuka next to him couldn't help but interject: "......I~diot".

"It's nothing to be surprised about. Your homeroom teacher was a Mystical Investigator in the past, and this old man's on good terms with the principal."

"Hoho. Your tongue is still merciless as ever, Dairenji. But you seem lively, so that's the best. I heard you're playing the part of an idol in the academy? How praiseworthy. Let me watch one of your classes."

"......Keep dreaming. Don't waste your time, hurry up and go work."

Amami teased her with a smile and Suzuka counterattacked in displeasure. Probably even Suzuka was a bit reserved when facing the chief of the Mystical Investigators, as the voice she talked back in didn't have the same force as before. No, it was more surprising that she could even be this eloquent with the chief of the Mystical Investigators in her position.

Kyouko said teasingly:

"You came to see Sensei because he was your old subordinate? How hard on you, to take time out of your busy schedule to come here."

"Hey hey, Kyouko-kun, that's my line, you shouldn't be saying it. Though I wouldn't say it."

"What, I just happened to have business outside and this place is on the way to the Onmyou Agency. It's just on the way."

Amami's shameless tone made it hard to think that he was actually a VIP of the Onmyou Agency, but Amami's informal attitude made Harutora feel very relaxed. When Amami and Ohtomo talked, the two sides' tones and styles were clearly

different, but they made others inadvertently comprehend that they were a former boss and subordinate.

However.

"Hah. You're full of crap. You wouldn't come to visit just for a 'former subordinate'. ...But, this makes me confident in my own thoughts."

Suzuka spoke haughtily. Harutora and the others cast questioning gazes at Suzuka, but Suzuka ignored them. After looking at Amami for a while, she stared coldly at Ohtomo.

"Never mind these guys for now, but I'm not an idiot. I did some investigation afterwards as to who exactly this 'Onmyouji' was who could easily disrupt the seal cast on me, who could use magic more ancient than Imperial Onmyoudou, who could fight on even terms with Ashiya Doman, and finally who could use an Independent Exorcist to achieve victory."

"......Hey, Suzuka."

Harutora next to her hastily urged her to stop after hearing his kouhai's impolite tone. But no one could turn a deaf ear to Suzuka's words. Harutora and the others had discussed Ohtomo's true identity themselves a few days ago.

Suzuka's eyes became sharp as she was immersed in the gazes of Harutora and the others.

"He's the right-hand man of the Mystical Investigator Chief, the 'Divine Fan' Amami. An anonymous Divine General Mystical Investigator during acting duty. ......Come to think of it, I heard a rumor once. I seem to remember your nickname was 'Shadow'? Though I stopped hearing the rumors of 'Shadow' a few years ago, I never would have thought you became a teacher at the Onmyou Academy."

Suzuka's mouth curved into a cold smile as she slowly declared.

Harutora and the others were all speechless.

Ohtomo showed a confused expression at this.

"Hah? What's all this about--"

"No, she's got it right."

"...Chief?!"

Ohtomo had planned on fooling them without missing a beat, but who knew that Amami next to him would have indifferently admitted it while tapping his knee with his folded fan. Ohtomo couldn't help but panic after Amami ruined his act. Amami laughed at him as if saying that there was no problem in being honest.

"These kids all witnessed your fight against Ashiya Doman, right? In that case, even if you want to fool them for now, it'll be no use in the end. Ah, incidentally, there's no reason to use a pretentious title like 'Shadow'. You might as well use the nickname 'Kuroko'."

"......The name 'Divine Fan' is what's actually pretentious. Isn't it much more shameful? ......Please give me a break, this is enough....."

Ohtomo put his right hand on his face exhaustedly. The students were silent and speechless.

"Ahh, but, listen up. You can't tell this to anyone else. The requirements of strict secrecy are still in force. You'll be turned over to the Mystical Investigators if you expose it."

Amami said joyfully. It was indistinguishable which parts of his words were a joke, if any. Though Harutora and the others nodded repeatedly, their expressions were still of shock.

"......Ohtomo-sensei is..... A former Divine General!?"

Harutora's eyes widened as he slowly repeated.

That truth was too much of a shock. But Harutora could accept that truth now. In fact, it would be even harder to understand if that weren't the truth. In any case, Ohtomo could fight equally with Ashiya Doman. He couldn't possibly be an ordinary Onmyouji, nor could he be an ordinary former Mystical Investigator. It was more convincing that he was a National First-Class Onmyouji.

"There are all kinds of National First-Class Onmyouji too. There are annoyingly slow ones, old men who like to pretend they're young, and youthful pubescent girls with twisted personalities and only a skilled tongue."

"What does that mean? Liking to pretend they're young?"

"Hah!? Who's a pubescent girl!?"

Ohtomo's seemingly resentful remark led to intense reactions from Amami and Suzuka. Now that Ohtomo mentioned it, Amami was also a member of the Twelve Divine Generals. Harutora inadvertently contrasted the three of them. An uninformed person truly wouldn't be able to see that they were Divine Generals.

Natsume, who had been silent before, suddenly shivered, shaking her head and fidgeting.

"Ohtomo-sensei is a National First-Class Onmyouji..... B-But, in that case, I can understand the incident last month. The high-level magic battle too! But, why would Sensei come to the Onmyou Academy to be a teacher? It's also very strange to resign from the job of Mystical Investigator. With your skills, you should be completely competent, right?"

Ohtomo didn't react after hearing Natsume's question. Amami took the initiative to nod his head and say:

"It's true. He doesn't have any other skills, and if he stayed on this side, at least he would be able to make some contributions to the people and help everyone out."

"None of your business. The law guarantees me the right to freely choose my profession."

Ohtomo, who sat on the bed, glared at the also-sitting Amami, saying unpleasant words. The two of them were just an inch from being shameful. To be honest, the two of them didn't seem like adults at all.

"......Never mind your reason for resigning for now. The reason Ohtomo-sensei came to the Onmyou Academy was probably you, Natsume."

After Touji said this to the surprised Natsume, he continued speaking to Harutora.

"Because Ohtomo-sensei only started at the Onmyou Academy last year, which was after Natsume entered. The principal knows divination, and she anticipated the various troubles that would happen after you arrived in Tokyo. In order to coordinate with your entrance, the principal invited Ohtomo-sensei via Chief Amami. That speculation seems appropriate. Actually, the principal's arrangements were completely useful this time."

Natsume stared at Ohtomo's face in surprise after hearing Touji's speculation.

Silent without a word, Ohtomo showed an indifferent expression like always. Then, Amami happily harrumphed, speaking in place of his ignorance-feigning subordinate.

"......Not bad. When you encounter important things, you first think for yourself before asking others. Not bad at all."

"In other words, he guessed right?"

"That's also for you to think about yourself, kid. But, there's just one thing I want to tell you. Every adult in 'this world' is a trickster. If you trust each and every one of their words, you'll be unable to stand on your own anymore."

After Amami finished speaking, he laughed with a "hehe". Then, he tapped his fan and stood up.

He looked at his refined wristwatch.

"I've been here for a long time. ...Ohtomo, you tell them about what I said just now. I won't be able to contact you for a while, but be prepared for it."

"......Be careful."

"Hah, don't say that. Being encouraged by your makes me feel sick."

Ohtomo momentarily showed a serious expression, and Amami returned a fearless smile to him. Then, he smiled at Harutora and the others, said "Say hello to Miyo-chan for me" to Kyouko, and then left the hospital room.

Harutora and the others silently watched Amami slowly grow distant in the corridor.

Though this old man didn't put on airs, he still felt like an 'adult' to Harutora and the others. He carried a dignity that made one feel 'Oh, so this is a higher-up of the Onmyou Agency."

Harutora and the others' gazes only fell on the bedridden Ohtomo after Amami's figure vanished.

Harutora and the others had come to see Ohtomo today. But, probably because they had heard that Ohtomo was a former Divine General, the familiar, relaxed atmosphere they had while entering the hospital room suddenly no longer existed.

Putting aside the fellow Divine General Suzuka and Touji who didn't know fear for now, the other four felt inexplicably uneasy when they faced Ohtomo.

The students' reactions made the homeroom teacher let out a sigh mixed with a smile.

"Why don't you sit down first. I just happened to have something to tell you guys."

"......Is it what Chief Amami mentioned just now?"

Natsume asked and Ohtomo answered "Yes".

Ohtomo had Harutora's group of six sit anywhere. He concisely explained the plan for the operation against the Twin-Horned Syndicate that he had just heard of from Amami.

The Twin-Horned Syndicate, a mysterious organization founded by Yakou fanatics, had extended its claws towards Natsume several times before. After hearing Ohtomo's words, Natsume and Harutora's expressions immediately became solemn, and the other four also listened seriously to Ohtomo's explanation. To Harutora and the others, this was business related to their own safety. They couldn't be careless.

"......In other words, they're finally wiping out the Twin-Horned Syndicate?"

"At least Chief Amami plans to. Though we haven't clearly seen the complete picture of the Twin-Horned Syndicate, and it's hard to say whether we can eradicate them."

Ohtomo lightly replied to Harutora's question. Actually, the Mystical Investigator Chief had always been hunting members of the Twin-Horned Syndicate. Though they had captured a few members, they had still been unable to completely stop the Twin-Horned Syndicate's movements. Moreover, the Twin-Horned Syndicate also had quite a few members planted inside the Onmyou Agency.

"In any case, you need to be on your guard. Though the Onmyou Agency will send guards, you yourselves have to pay attention to your surrounding situation."

Even Ohtomo couldn't make any decent proposal in their current situation. Even so, Harutora and the others took their homeroom teacher's advice to heart.

"Does that mean that the Twin-Horned Syndicate and Ashiya Doman were secretly working together?"

This time Tenma asked Ohtomo a question.

"Sensei, I heard you say after the incident last month that 'Though Ashiya Doman's already dead, we don't know whether he's already gone', right? What does that mean?"

"Yeah. You said 'we're fine for now'..... Didn't that guy explode together with the car at the end? Could it be that he could still be alive like that?"

Tenma's expression showed an unconcealable anxiety. Harutora continued his words, loudly questioning Ohtomo.

Ohtomo rubbed his neck.

"I told you when you came to visit me before, right? That Domahoshi is an ara-mitama."

"We didn't ask you to explain properly before because we didn't have much time, right? At the time, Sensei's condition didn't look too good either..... We didn't ask for details because you said there wouldn't be any problems for now!"

But, if the Twin-Horned Syndicate were becoming active again, that was a different matter. Harutora and the others couldn't ignore the movements of Doman, who was mysteriously related to the Twin-Horned Syndicate..... But, even people who were completely on alert couldn't predict what those movements would be. Ohtomo had once said to Harutora: "Although there are no problems for now, you can't become

loose". Harutora hadn't understood the meaning in those words at all and had always taken it as a 'bad joke'.

Of course, Harutora was also very concerned, so he had once had Natsume explain what and 'ara-mitama' was to him.

In short, ara-mitama were 'gods of havoc', and it seemed that they could also be called 'troublemaking gods'. Evil, rude, and abnormal gods would bring about various calamities. But on the other hand, they could be made into powerful guardians of if they were adequately worshipped. The representative ara-mitama was Gozu Tenno, which became an object of faith in Gion. Moreover, there were many souls of people who had been killed that were worshipped as ara-mitama. This was the so-called Goryo Shinko.

But, in the end, this explanation was just the explanation of the Shinto belief.

The standard of modern magic, General Onmyoudou, had been established by splitting magic from faith. Hence, ara-mitama were often defined as special spiritual disasters with discrepant spiritual power. For example, modern magic believed that ara-mitama were spiritual disasters formed with a core of the spiritual body that a person with strong spiritual power left behind after death under certain conditions.

Even so, research of human souls was banned in General Onmyoudou. All of this was but a hypothesis. Hence, even if Natsume explained as Harutora requested, it didn't rise above a conceptual level.

"Honestly, I don't understand ara-mitama and mitama. What exactly is going on? That Ashiya Doman was a spiritual disaster? Like the Nue? He was just a Phase three who happened to form a human shape? That kind of absurd thing--"

"Yes."

"...Huh?"

"Aren't you quite knowledgeable, Harutora-kun. Isn't it like you said? That Domahoshi can be classified into the same category as the Type-Chimera you defeated according to the General Onmyoudou system of magic."

Harutora stared at Ohtomo who had calmly affirmed him, his face incredulous.

"......You're joking, right?"

"I'm not joking. More accurately, it wasn't a Type-Chimera, but a Type-Ogre."

Ohtomo spoke pretentiously as if it were deliberate.

The phrase 'Type-Ogre' made Touji, who listened from the side, shiver. Type-Ogres were the so-called 'oni'. Touji had become a living spirit because there was a Type-Ogre residing in his body.

"Also, Harutora-kun. How are things like spiritual disasters produced? Can you try explaining?"

"Eh? S, Spiritual disaster? Let me think..... 'Everything is filled with aura, and though it constantly moves, it is overall very stable. However, abnormalities are occasionally produced in aura....." Anyway, aura occasionally swings to the extreme, and hence the balance of the five elements deviates very strongly, right? In normal circumstances, it returns to normal by itself, but sometimes the abnormality that occurs causes a chain reaction of a certain level and the situation develops for the worse..... That kind of aura will become miasma and form a spiritual disaster....."

Harutora abandoned his reciting of the textbook halfway, grabbing onto the important points to form an explanation of his understanding of spiritual disasters. Ohtomo stared at the student he had taught, his expression gloomy as if it were a barely passing answer.

"That's it. That phase is Phase One. When it becomes a Phase One - a disaster that can cause spiritual harm, spiritual disasters often are unable to recover by themselves. If we leave them be, they worsen. .....Then, what happens after they worsen?"

"Th, They're Phase Two when they can cause physical damage to the surroundings, right? After that, they're Phase Three if they materialize. Phase Four is large-scale....."

"Phase Four refers to the origin spiritual disaster when the miasma given off instantly materializes in the area, leading to a situation like a chain reaction. .....Let's return to the topic a bit. From the development from Phase Two to Phase Three - in other words, when the spirit is 'materializing', the spiritual disaster will engulf material that can become its core in order to materialize more easily. That's its method of 'possessing' objects."

"Ah. A v-vessel?"

"Right. It creates a vessel as its core, the same as a materialized shikigami. Although the spiritual disaster's growth is slow in that situation, on the other hand, its stability increases. But if it stays in a period of increased stability for a long time, then even if it loses the vessel acting as its core, the spiritual disaster will still continue existing stably."

Just then, Ohtomo glanced at Touji.

"Take Touji's situation for example. Type-Ogre spiritual disasters are actually mobile spiritual disasters that use humans as cores for materialization - in other words, 'stable spiritual disasters with human cores'. This type of spiritual disaster is a bit different from spiritual disasters with inorganic cores. This kind of spiritual disaster probably uses the human's aura - the human's spiritual body - as a core.

That's because the aura can merge with the spiritual disaster's miasma. Hence, a spiritual disaster formed this way can maintain the consciousness of the human core for a long time. In addition, even if the vital activity of the host human stops, its body decays, or disappears completely, the human's consciousness still remains. No, we usually believe that's not all. Of course, no one knows to what degree that consciousness or the human's original identity remains, and it's impossible to test."

"......Human consciousness....."

"Yes. That's an 'oni'."

Ohtomo said.

Harutora's face was a bit pale. He swallowed.

If you excluded Touji, Harutora and the others had never seen a 'true oni'. Last year, the 'Kakugyouki' that the Yakou fanatic Mystical Investigator had controlled had been proven at the end to be just a counterfeit simple shikigami. Though the Type-Chimera they had witnessed during the spring had seemed like a giant monster from the outside, it had actually just felt more or less like a giant beast, nothing 'humanlike'.

"That means--"

Touji leaned forward happily.

"Even if I become an oni directly, my consciousness will still remain? Just like Doman?"

"I-Idiot! Don't say such an unlucky thing!"

"I just want to know."

His good friend indifferently answered Harutora's panicked angry shout with a satirical smile. Ohtomo blankly returned the words "I said it couldn't be verified."

".....Hold on, Sensei said that Ashiya Doman was an ara-mitama, and not an oni. Or are oni the same as ara-mitama?"

Kyouko asked him. It seemed that even she was unable to understand and was in a strange sense of partial understanding. Even Ohtomo probably had trouble coming up with an explanation immediately. "Uh." He pondered, scratching his head in confusion.

"Honestly, it depends what you base your judgment on. There are oni that are taken to be ara-mitama. On the other hand, there are ara-mitama or objects of the Goryo Shinko that are classified as Type-Ogre spiritual disasters under General Onmyoudou. What's more, the way they're divided is up to everyone's own way of thinking."

Ohtomo didn't make it clear, avoiding answering directly.

Just as Touji had pointed out in front of Amami, Ohtomo was just a new teacher, and he hadn't even been teaching for a year yet. Moreover, never mind explaining according to the textbooks, the current problem was controversial and didn't have a common conclusion. It was tough on Ohtomo to concisely explain it such that the students could understand.

".....But, on the premise that 'the way they're divided is up to everyone's own way of thinking', you're definitely going to have me talk about my thoughts or how I see them, right? I think that ara-mitama and mitama are a kind of evolved spiritual disaster."

Ohtomo crossed his arms, muttering lightly. He mentioned his premise as a opener.

He said to the students who had quieted down again to listen:

"There's this way of putting it. When spiritual disasters that develop to Phase Three or Phase Four continue to develop..... After the spiritual disaster chain reaction

reaches its limits, the deviation in aura, which is the spiritual disaster's roots, is no longer just a 'deviation'. In a local region, balance returns back to its 'normal state', enough in the end for the world to accept. It's said that this existence becomes one state of the many forms of aura, a universalization."

"......S-Sensei, excuse me, but what does that explanation mean....."

Even Natsume admitted defeat after Kyouko. She raised a question, her forehead sweating. Honestly, at this point the talk was no longer in the realm of magic.

But it was hard to tell whether Ohtomo acknowledged the students' reactions. He nodded with a steady gaze, continuing to speak.

"The important point is, the meaning is that when spiritual disasters develop to their limits, they become gods - that's what it means."

"......Ah?"

"Gods?"

Harutora and Tenma murmured blankly. The two of them revealed stunned smiles, as if they didn't know how to react other than this. Natsume and Kyouko were also about the same, and Touji had already given up on understanding, just uttering "eh" out of interest.

"Yes. In that view, you could say that ancient spiritual existences believed to be gods are also a kind of spiritual disaster. If you categorize them roughly, the spiritual disasters with human cores - the Type-Ogres - are human gods, and the other kinds of spiritual disasters are the yaoyorozu no kami..... Or probably something like that. Though it's a bit rough and forced, that's probably the reasoning behind it."

After Ohtomo said this, he looked at Suzuka again.

"Suzuka, you should know, right? Researchers often mention it, Phase Five..... Commonly known as the Final Phase."

Harutora and the others reflexively looked towards Suzuka upon hearing Ohtomo's words.

Though even Natsume and Kyouko couldn't understand Ohtomo's words, no matter what, Suzuka was after all a magic researcher, a specialist. She clearly understood what Ohtomo was saying.

And more.

".....Of course I know. Also, it was my father who advocated that theory."

Harutora and the others couldn't help but become restless. Even Ohtomo exclaimed "What?" in surprise.

In the framework of General Onmyoudou, many things that had once been viewed as gods were all explained as spiritual disasters. On the other hand, things like mitama and research relating to human spirits were banned in the first place and sealed in the darkness. The current magic community focused on the effects of magic in real society, so they no longer performed research on gods of faith or souls that were hard to test from an ethical standpoint, throwing them aside.

However, the only agency that had tread into those regions in modern times was that one.

The Imperial Household Agency Lingering Spirit Division that had once become the breeding ground for the Twin-Horned Syndicate. Dairenji Shidou, the Twin-Horned Syndicate's mastermind and Suzuka's father, had been the person in charge of that division.

".....I see. So that was the view of the one called the 'Professor', Dairenji Shidou."

"That's right. Still, I don't know the details about it. My research specialty was Imperial Onmyoudou, and I didn't progress any further. Personally, I don't have any interest in it anyway."

Suzuka spoke almost rudely, and her tone indeed sounded uninterested. Ohtomo scratched his head a bit awkwardly again.

"Phase Five, the next stage after Phase Four, is just something that should exist 'in theory'. We haven't observed an actual example before. Now that that's out of the way, we return to the previous topic..... Oni and ara-mitama are both Type-Ogres, but the former is a Phase Three or Phase Four. In contrast, the latter is a Phase Five."

Ohtomo concluded his previous remarks. Harutora stared confusedly at his homeroom teacher.

"Though I studied this for some time, even I don't understand it. Well, it's quite obscure, or just conceptually daunting. .....Incidentally, in the oni - or Phase Three - stage, the lingering consciousness of the people who become cores is often very strong. Because there are examples of those circumstances, so we can affirm it. But, after becoming Phase Four, most of their self-consciousness crumbles and scatters..... They become a universal collective consciousness after reaching Phase Five..... This probably belongs to a kind of archetype that Jung mentioned..... Honestly, I don't really understand this aspect."

"......Sensei."

"Hmm? What is it, Harutora-kun."

"My apologies, I'm really sorry, but my brain's really bad, so I'm not too sure what your conclusion is....."

Ashamed, Harutora lowered his head, speaking abnormally honestly.

"Anyway, there's just one thing I hope you can tell me. Sensei, you said after the incident that 'Though Ashiya Doman's dead, we don't know whether he's already gone', right? What, specifically, did that mean?"

It was probably also very important to understand the theoretical nature and bold assumptions of what he had heard just now. But Harutora still couldn't relax without hearing about the most important issue.

Ohtomo said "I see" after hearing Harutora's request and sat upright on the bed.

He pushed up his glasses with his finger.

"Indeed, though we say that Domahoshi is an ara-mitama, I feel that he belongs to quite a special category."

"Special?"

"Yeah. Though he's basically a spiritual disaster with a lingering human consciousness, even though he's called an ara-mitama, he's different from the ones who only had a bit of human consciousness left. His personality is clearly extremely strong. For example, when I destroyed the body that was that Domahoshi's core, his aura didn't weaken or scatter, right? In other words, he's already stabilized and no longer needs a core. But he still insists on using a human body as his core. Perhaps using a human body as a core isn't to stabilize himself as a 'spiritual disaster' but to safeguard his self-consciousness as 'Ashiya Doman'. Through the bindings of his vessel, he can deliberately attempt to stop his consciousness at around the state of Phase Three or Phase Four and remain in this world through those means. It's probably..... out of his obsession with magic."

"What an injustice", Ohtomo muttered deeply.

"Obsession....."

Come to think of it, Doman had been constantly dedicated to a 'competition of magic' in the battle last month. Maybe Ohtomo had incited his obsession, making Doman, who had proposed the fight and whose level was higher than his own, face him one-on-one. He had protected Harutora and the others by going along with the 'game' Doman had carried out, thus fulfilling his duty.

Ohtomo spoke emotionally.

"If that Domahoshi - the spiritual disaster known as 'D' - truly arose from Ashiya Doman..... Then that ara-mitama truly existed with a human body vessel since the Heian period until now."

"The Heian period!? H, How many years ago was that.....?"

"Probably a thousand years ago."

Harutora's body shivered in surprise.

It wasn't just Harutora, Natsume and the others all couldn't speak as if they had been dazed. How should he put it - he couldn't even imagine that sort of thing.

"Of course, human flesh can't maintain human shape for that long of a time. So, it's reasonable to speculate that he probably constantly changed bodies. Though this is just my conjecture, it's probably true. The reason I said 'though Ashiya Doman's dead, we don't know whether he's already gone' to you was because I meant that his vessel was definitely 'dead', but it's unclear whether the spiritual disaster is destroyed. Moreover, even if he's still alive as a spiritual disaster, he's still lost his vessel, then we can probably believe that we're safe and sound until he possesses the next host body. .....How's that? Though I said a lot, it should be easy to understand this time, right?"

Ohtomo asked casually. Harutora's face tensed and he forced himself to nod.

What an inexplicable world. He couldn't at all imagine that the real world he lived in was the same world as the world of magic.

The world of magic was very vast. Not only was it vast, it was also supported by the accumulation of a long, long time. But actually, this situation wasn't limited to the magic world. Harutora didn't think of it, but the 'world' was incomparably vast, and this vastness all came from the accumulation of a long time - the 'past'.

Harutora's 'own world' probably seemed tiny in comparison.

At the same time, Natsume's face also tightened again after Ohtomo finished saying his main point.

"Sensei, how long do you think it will take for Ashiya Doman to find the next vessel and recover?"

"That's hard to say. Also, I don't know whether he has to go find a vessel."

"Huh? What's that mean?"

Natsume immediately asked back. Ohtomo hesitated for a while over whether to say it, but finally continued speaking.

"It wouldn't be strange for him to have prepared the 'next vessel' beforehand. For example, the 'old man' that I fought with. As I saw it, that vessel was already half-dead from the start. Simply put, it felt like a corpse to me. Never mind living humans for now, it's not even that troublesome to preserve a corpse with magic."

"A, A corpse..... huh? But, he uses humans as vessels, so why would he use a corpse....."

"No, isn't that more suitable? I said just now, but spiritual disasters that use humans as corpses merge with that person's aura. If Domahoshi was devoted to the individual consciousness of Ashiya Doman, then it would be more suitable for the vessel not

to have a consciousness, since he wouldn't mix with any unnecessary consciousness. If it just has to be a 'humanlike' carrier, an unconscious corpse is the more fitting option. Domahoshi also said that he was 'unorthodox', so that's probably it."

"......That means..."

"Ashiya Doman's recovery could be unexpectedly fast..... right?"

Touji continued Natsume's words of confirmation. Touji had started paying attention to listening in after things became simplified. Ohtomo spread his hands, repeating: "I said, I can't tell."

"Though he could recover as long as he switches vessels, switching might require years or decades of preparation..... Even if he possesses a new vessel, he might need time to 'adapt'. I'm not too clear on magic of 'unorthodoxy', so I can't imagine. .....But."

"But?"

"I feel it will be very fast."

Touji showed a fearless smile, and Suzuka just looked at the ceiling. Harutora, Natsume, Kyouko, and Tenma couldn't help but moan.

Thanks to Ohtomo, they had just barely escaped by the skin of their teeth last time. But right now, Ohtomo was hospitalized and they couldn't imagine how another fight with Doman would turn out.

".....I hope that at least you all can safely get through the Twin-Horned Syndicate operation this time. I'm serious."

Harutora groaned in displeasure. The others probably had the same feelings.

"I'm not sure to what degree Domahoshi cooperates with the Twin-Horned Syndicate. Though the sedan exploded at the end, we haven't figure out the reason for now, so it's reasonable for you all to not get careless."

Ohtomo had once been responsible for investigating the Twin-Horned Syndicate when he had been a Mystical Investigator. He had been the first person to notice contact between the Twin-Horned Syndicate and Ashiya Doman - 'D'.

But he had left the Mystical Investigators before Dairenji Shidou brought about the spiritual disaster terrorist attack. So, he wasn't too clear on what kind of organization the Twin-Horned Syndicate had now become, nor was he knowledgeable on what the relationship between Doman and the Twin-Horned Syndicate had turned into.

"In any case, the conclusion's the same. 'There are no problems for now'. But, you can't become careless. Though I lost consciousness and was sent to the hospital just recently, you should listen to what I say."

Their homeroom teacher's face went proud with joy, but unfortunately, he couldn't obtain respect and approval from his students.

Harutora smiled dryly.

"......Hey, Natsume? If Ashiya Doman really is an ara-mitama, we should worship him. In that case, maybe he'll become your guardian."

"Bakatora..... Though I want to say that, I actually also thought of that."

Natsume replied seriously to Harutora's joke. Maybe those words were unexpectedly truthful. Actually, it had been so during Ohtomo and Doman's battle too. Even though the degree of intensity of their magic battle had reached a peak, Ohtomo had always given Doman as much 'respect' as possible. Nor had he used a weapon to resist the monster with superhuman knowledge. Perhaps there were such methods of battle too.

Of course, they didn't feel that they would be able to hold on to proper manners in case they faced Doman.

In any case, the topic regarding Doman ended here. Everyone in the hospital room felt a bit exhausted, even though they had only had a conversation. But since the contents were very serious, no one wanted to say anything more. They probably all had their own thoughts, things that they had been inspired to think about, and things that they had to think about.

But.

"...Hey."

Suzuka murmured, breaking the silence.

"It seems like everyone's forgotten, but we didn't come here today to ask about Ashiya Doman, right?"

Suzuka seemed to be a bit impatient and her tone was a bit prickly. Harutora, who had completely forgotten their main topic, went "ah" and finally remembered.

"Damn, I forgot. Sensei, I actually have something to ask you."

"What is it, is that serious?"

"Well, though I don't know whether this is something serious, has Sensei heard of the Yakou Academy?"

"Yakou Academy?"

Ohtomo couldn't help but raise an eyebrow upon hearing Harutora's question.

"That name is quite strange. Are you talking about Yakou's private school?"

"You know!?"

"No, I'm not very familiar. But it seems like Yakou had many students during the war. The Onmyou Bureau and the military at the time both contained his students. What about that private school?"

"Well actually, recently we heard that that Yakou Academy was the predecessor of the current Onmyou Academy....."

This time, both of Ohtomo's eyebrows rose.

He silently stared at Harutora for a while.

"......That's my first time hearing so. Did the principal say this?"

"No, she didn't - ahh, right. Sensei, do you know a student named Souma Takiko? A girl with red hair."

"What, one question after another..... Souma Takiko? I haven't heard of her. Also, are there any red-haired students in the Onmyou Academy?"

"She called herself a student."

"Called herself..... Where did you guys see her?"

"On the roof of the academy building. It wasn't too long ago, and she wore the uniform."

Harutora reported extremely briefly on his encounter with Takiko. Ohtomo's brows were furrowed for the whole time. After hearing Harutora's words, he went:

"......Uh~....."

He pondered heavily.

"......Souma.....Souma, huh..... Maybe there are students with that name, but there aren't any with red hair. Unless she normally has black hair and just happened to dye it red, there shouldn't be such a person."

Harutora murmured "I see" slightly regretfully upon hearing Ohtomo's answer.

He had partially anticipated that outcome regarding the Yakou Academy and Takiko. Ohtomo didn't have a very long history as a teacher and his understanding of the Onmyou Academy wasn't very special in the first place.

However.

If Harutora had asked that question before Amami had left, Amami might have thought of it when he heard of the name 'Souma'.

No, even if he didn't think of it for a while, Suzuka would have made the association as she watched. The probability would have been very high.

But--

Amami had left, and Suzuka didn't know the name herself.

Harutora was a bit disheartened after asking those questions, but he wasn't very concerned about those questions anyway.

"I see. Then, can I ask another question? It's about something completely different."

"Hey hey, there's more?"

"It's the last question. Also, you probably know this person, right? ...Saotome Ryou."

"...!"

This time, Ohtomo's reaction was very slightly troubled.

But this slightly troubled reaction was clearly different from when he had heard about the Yakou Academy or Takiko's name before.

When he had been identified as 'Shadow' before, Ohtomo hadn't panicked at all until Amami exposed it. But, although this was a bit unexpectedly sudden now, it was

still visible that he had momentarily wavered. Hence, in some sense, Harutora's actions could probably be called a great feat.

He had managed to make Ohtomo slip up.

"......Ah."

Ohtomo immediately understood that Harutora and the others had seen him momentarily waver. He knocked himself on the forehead with his hand.

"......Ah, that's bad. I really need to recuperate....."

He muttered that sentence as if talking to himself, his expression bitter.

After seeing the reaction of his homeroom teacher,

"Ohtomo-sensei--!"

Natsume leaned forward.

"Do you know? About Saotome Ryou?"

"......She was classmates with me. But, who told you this?"

"No one told us, we happened to notice it. We found it in the graduation name registers in the academy library."

"Name registers? So that's how you found it."

This was the first time Harutora and the others saw Ohtomo this troubled. They were probably poking at his wounds. Suzuka stood up to succeed Natsume upon seeing Ohtomo's reaction.

"...Well, it seems like coming here was worth it. Judging from your reaction, you also know that Saotome Ryou was a pioneer of Yakou research. Can you tell us? Can you say everything you know?"

Suzuka gazed at the bedridden Ohtomo and asked coldly and firmly.

Ohtomo twisted his mouth.

The eyes behind his glasses surveyed Natsume's reaction with a clear, transparent gaze.

"......Is this about the 'Raven's Wing'?"

Natsume couldn't help but tense up, and Harutora was the same. The fact that he thought of the Raven's Wing right after hearing Saotome Ryou's name proved that Ohtomo knew about Saotome's research in great detail.

Harutora's group of six stared holes in Ohtomo.

Ohtomo gave up resistance, his shoulders slumping powerlessly.

Then, he said:

"You guys are wrong."

"Hah!? You still want to play dumb now!?"

Suzuka couldn't help but retort. Ohtomo replied gently: "It's not that."

"It's Suzu."

"Hmm?"

"It's written Saotome Ryou, but it's actually Saotome Suzu. I remember that she would deliberately write 'Saotome Suzu' in hiragana when she wrote her name."

Ohtomo wrote the name on the bedsheets with his finger for the stunned Harutora to see.

Harutora spoke with a slightly agitated tone for some reason.

"Saotome..... Suzu?"

Ohtomo smiled slightly.

"Though it's a bit unfitting for me to say this..... but be careful. That woman can't be dealt with by normal means."

Part 5

The first class on the next day was planned for the first meeting room.

It was still early summer. The first meeting room was the biggest meeting room of the Meguro branch, and the scenery of the courtyard was visible through the window. Harutora and the others came to the branch earlier than usual and gathered to sit by the window, waiting for class to start. Their topic was mainly about their visiting Ohtomo yesterday.

"In the end, Saotome Suzu's whereabouts are unclear. How worrisome."

"......Nothing we can do. Though they were in the same class, the two of them both left the Onmyou Agency for some time....."

Though Natsume answered Touji's mutter, she was even more disheartened. She had originally held some expectations before they visited Ohtomo, but even if they had learned that Ohtomo had deeper contact with Saotome Suzu than they had anticipated, they had been unable to obtain any useful information in the end. Moreover, they had even lost their clue, so they couldn't continue anywhere. Hence, it was excusable that Natsume felt depressed.

They had heard afterwards that not only had Ohtomo been in the same class as Saotome, they had entered the Onmyou Agency at the same time after graduation. But Ohtomo had been assigned to the Mystical Investigators, while Saotome had been assigned to a research division. And afterwards, she had been assigned to the Imperial Household Agency Lingering Spirit Division as per her own request.

In addition, Saotome had suddenly 'vanished' after working only a year at the Lingering Spirit Division.

Since Saotome had entered a division of the Imperial Household Agency, almost no one within the Onmyou Agency knew much about her. Even so, the Mystical

Investigators had seemed to have pursued her traces before, but ended up without any information and could only give up. The rumor that she had died had spread through the division once.

But, when Harutora and the others asked about this,

"She's not dead. That's impossible."

Ohtomo spoke strangely boldly.

He spoke lightly about what they knew regarding Saotome when he had been in the Mystical Investigators.

However, honestly, Harutora and the others didn't know whether what Ohtomo was saying was the 'complete truth' that he knew. What they could determine was that they couldn't get any more information out of his mouth, even if Natsume and Suzuka interrogated him. Did Ohtomo truly only know this much, or did he just not want to say it? Either way, Harutora and the others weren't able to tell with their eyes.

The adults in this world are all tricksters. If you take everything they say to be true, you'll be unable to stand on your own.

The words of the Mystical Investigator Chief seemed to still linger by their ears.

".....Come to think of it, Kyouko, how's the principal?"

Touji asked after thinking of it.

"Sorry, I haven't asked. Grandma always comes back home before daybreak - also, she leaves early in the morning. I came here alone. She's really busy recently."

Kyouko replied with an apologetic face.

"It might take a long time to call her..... For now, I sent her a mail saying 'I have something to ask you'. Ah, incidentally, I will ask about Saotome. Grandma was always quite interested in what the students did after graduation. Maybe she might know something..... But don't expect too much."

Kyouko noticed Natsume's gaze, and warned her in a fluster. Actually, there were quite the number of Onmyou Academy graduates. The principal couldn't possibly keep a hold on information about everyone.

The last resort of their investigation into Saotome had failed, and they were still clueless about the Yakou Academy that Takiko had spoken of. Harutora and the others were in low spirits, yet could do nothing.

However.

"Harutora-kun, what's wrong? It feels like you've been spacing out since a while back."

Tenma suddenly spoke to Harutora.

Harutora was resting his chin on his hand over the desk.

"Huh? .....Ah, yeah. I was thinking about some things."

Flustered, Harutora glossed it over with a smile.

"Come to think of it, Harutora, you were deep in thought since I ate breakfast with you in the dorm, right? Did something Ohtomo-sensei said make you concerned?"

"Well, I have a lot of things I'm concerned about after hearing something that long. Right now I'm only thinking of one thing, though."

"That's interesting. Let's hear it."

Natsume narrowed her eyes, leaning her face closer in dissatisfaction. It seemed that she had accumulated a lot of negative feelings when their information about Saotome had broken off. Right now, her attitude was prickly as always.

Harutora shrugged his shoulders.

"I said it wasn't anything big. It's just that..... Now that I think about it, Senpai's also called 'Suzu'."

"Senpai? Which senpai?"

"The one we bumped into when we went to visit the hospital yesterday."

Natsume also thought of her when Harutora explained this. Natsume furrowed her brows, as if to say 'what are you talking about'.

But Touji was the one to actually speak.

"Harutora, what are you talking about. Saotome Suzu was in the same class as Ohtomo-sensei, right? Would a student from the thirty-sixth class still be at the Onmyou Academy as a third-year?"

"No, I said--"

".....Bakatora, although I didn't really greet her yesterday, that person was a third-year, and she looks too young, right? Saotome was in the same class as Ohtomo-sensei, so even if their ages were a bit different, she would be at least twenty-five or twenty-six, right?"

"I know that too! It was just that her name was a bit strange, so I felt that it was very coincidental! .....Also, I'm very concerned about that kid....."

"Kid?"

"Ahh, no..... Nothing."

Come to think of it, only Harutora had seen the boy sitting in the Mini. It was very hard to tell how strange that scene was to someone who hadn't actually witnessed it. More importantly, Harutora was still currently worried that if he said what he thought right now, people would just laugh at him.

That boy's attire, presence, and atmosphere.

The voice and manner of speech that he had heard by accident.

...No, it couldn't be.

It was just a coincidence that Senpai had the same name. Otherwise, the fact that he was riding with Senpai would be befuddling.

"Hmm, I'm just thinking too much....."

"Harutora, what have you been saying recently?"

"It seems that it's best for you to rest a bit in these circumstances."

Harutora frowned upsettedly upon hearing the overdone rhetoric of the two. Kyouko couldn't help but giggle after seeing that scene.

Tenma called out in time.

"Sensei's here."

After the door opened, the teacher walked into the meeting room. Harutora and the others sat in their seats in a panic.

The first class was a lecture. The content of lectures had become deeper after they advanced to the second year. But in the students' point of view, the lecture atmosphere wasn't as tense as practical skills classes. Moreover, this was still the first class in the morning, so the atmosphere in the meeting room was a bit relaxed.

But, once the man behind the teacher walked in, the students instantly froze up.

"...Ah!?"

Harutora's eyes widened and Natsume next to him gasped. Touji, Kyouko, and Tenma were the same. In addition, the students in the classroom all exclaimed in unison and stopped moving. This scene happened to resemble an eagle flying into a cage of small chicks.

Then, another man walked into the meeting room, but the students' gazes were all still staring at the previous man. The teacher surveyed the students' reactions with a bitter face and coughed deliberately.

...Why.....!?

No, they didn't need to ask the question why. In any case, this place was the Meguro branch, a branch of the Exorcist Bureau. To him, this was his workplace. In fact, it might have been unnatural that they hadn't seen him before.

Even so, they still couldn't understand why he naturally walked behind their teacher into the meeting room where they were holding class.

Harutora stared at that man.

Then, the man also noticed Harutora and the others.

Though they had only met once, that was already enough. The man wore sunglasses whose lenses were plated with reflective coating. He wore several earrings on his ears and a choker around his neck. There was an 'X' scar like a knife wound on his forehead underneath his short silver hair.

He wore a jacket over a T-shirt and wore jeans on the lower half of his body. This outfit was quite incompatible with this location. However, contrasting with his external appearance and dress, the ominous air the man gave off completely rejected the surrounding environment.

He looked at Harutora and Natsume again.

"You should have heard, right?"

The man called out, grinning.

"Rejoice. This is the best VIP treatment, because I myself will be guarding you guys."

Kagami Reiji of the Twelve Divine Generals boasted proudly in front of the stunned Harutora.

The Mystical Investigators' operation against the Twin-Horned Syndicate began simultaneously.

# Chapter 3 - Twin-Horned Syndicate

## Part 1

Actually, Amami had spent almost a year preparing for his plan in the darkness.

The trigger had been last spring, when a member of the Twin-Horned Syndicate appeared in the Mystical Investigators. Since then, Amami had been carrying out a complete cleansing of the Mystical Investigators, cleaning up the department in phases. Although they didn't reshuffle anything on the surface, they substantially enhanced the power of the public safety department.

Of course, there were members of the Twin-Horned Syndicate in the Onmyou Agency that were still left undiscovered at this time. Although they had already realized the movement of the other spiritual disaster terrorist attack - the 'Hinamatsuri Repurification' incident - they hadn't been able to stop it from happening. But on the other hand, along with the end of this incident, led by the prime suspect Mutobe Chihiro, the important members of the Twin-Horned Syndicate that belonged to the original Imperial Household Agency Lingering Spirit Division had almost retreated from the stage. After that, Amami had continued to be on alert about the unclear factor 'D', and simultaneously had put the sights completely on 'themselves' - in other words, the Twin-Horned Syndicate members who had infiltrated the Onmyou Agency.

Two days ago, Amami had judged that everything was prepared. When Amami had visited Ohtomo's hospital room, everything was ready and prepared to fly like the arrow nocked to a bow.

The Onmyou Agency Magical Crime Investigation Unit's Twin-Horned Syndicate Sweeping Operation progressed like lightning.

With the Mystical Investigators' public safety department as a center, they completely and mercilessly investigated the departments and bureaus of the Onmyou Agency. Through this sudden, executive-power inspection, they paralyzed the normal duties of the Onmyou Agency for more than half a day. The departments and bureaus that were targeted cried their grievances and scowled.

But this was just their actions on the surface.

After months of secret, detailed investigation, the Mystical Investigators had already locked on to the Twin-Horned Syndicate members beforehand. The Mystical Investigators' - Amami's - true goal was in how they would act towards this sweeping operation. He wanted to make clear where they would move and where they were connected to.

Also, Amami had one more goal.

"Kagami? We're going to have the 'Ogre-Eater' guard Tsuchimikado Natsume?"

A Mystical Investigator who had come to report exclaimed in Amami's base, in front of a desk of the Mystical Investigator Unit.

He was the foremost commander who had been appointed in this operation, the public safety department's elite, Hirata Atsune.

"What's going on?"

Hirata, hearing about this situation, questioned his boss who leaned forward over the table with a rare angry voice.

He was the star of this operation. He was young and looked about twenty-five or twenty-six. His face was good-looking, his expression was sharp, and his long black hair had a strand that was dyed crimson.

"He once clashed with the students of the Onmyou Academy - and even Tsuchimikado Natsume and his friends whom he would be guarding now. If Independent Officer Kogure hadn't rushed to the scene to arbitrate in time, things might have gone downhill. Chief, you should know about that incident very well, right?"

"......I remember it. I was scolded fiercely by that principal and homeroom teacher."
"In that case, then why? Independent Officer Kagami's power is indeed amazing, but his attitude towards his duty is normally problematic. Isn't he the least suitable choice for a guard duty, especially when he's guarding an underage person? In any case--"

Just then, Hirata lowered his voice and added forcefulness, as if he had clenched his teeth to shut out the last part.

"...This operation is just to force the Twin-Horned Syndicate to the branch. Isn't it the most dangerous choice to leave Tsuchimikado Natsume in that kind of place?"

According to the Mystical Investigators' investigations, the Twin-Horned Syndicate-related people who were viewed as the most serious were scattered across the entire Onmyou Agency. Among them, most were gathered in the Shinjuku branch of the Exorcist Bureau. Yakou fanatics who guided the Onmyou Agency from the darkness - the Mystical Investigators currently knew that the highest-ranking member of the Twin-Horned Syndicate command system was an exorcist named Makihara Yoshitaka. He currently belonged to the Shinjuku branch.

Right now, the Mystical Investigators had restricted their targets to the Onmyou Agency building and the headquarters of the Exorcist Bureau. They didn't ignore the existence of the branches, but rather, this was to bait the Twin-Horned Syndicate's actions.

The real game would be after they took the bait. The investigators here had already prepared for a magical battle. This operation was a raid. For this, the Mystical Investigators had to avoid having the Onmyou Academy students carry out unnatural evacuations, especially for Tsuchimikado Natsume who the Twin-Horned Syndicate had always been focused on. If they sheltered him, the enemy might see through the Mystical Investigators' intents.

Moreover, it would just be the Shinjuku branch that would become a battlefield. They didn't believe that they would encounter intense resistance from Twin-Horned Syndicate in the Meguro branch. In that case, the 'interior of the branch, fortified with exorcists' would become the area to protect Natsume. It definitely wasn't a bad choice.

But, Hirata judged that this decision of the Mystical Investigators was very dangerous. He couldn't simply take that opinion as a mistake. He had already put many young people in danger during 'D's attack last month.

So, he at least had to take precautions during the operation, and had proposed that Tsuchimikado Natsume be guarded.

"But the guard will be Independent Officer Kagami? I can't accept that."

Amami just stared intently back at his tight-faced subordinate.

Then, he muttered with a bitter face: "......There's no choice."

"That Kagami volunteered to be the guard."

"Volunteered?"

"Yeah. I don't know what he's planning. Kogure also opposed it..... but in the end Chief gave me the final word."

"....."

Hirata pressed his lips together as if he wanted to swallow back an objection. Amami continued frowning, anxiously tapping the desk with his fan.

"First off, this also troubles me, you know? There are more potential problems than the plan itself..... If the choice of person reached the ears of that man, he would want to curse me to death even while lying on his hospital bed."

Amami muttered to himself as if raising his hands high in surrender. His expression conveyed the gloominess in his heart.

Actually, the problem was that there were quite a few Onmyouji - all of different levels - included among the suspects of this plan. Of course, they were still quite few in comparison to the entire member body, but they were definitely still enough to seriously stagnate the functions of the various departments. In a state where they would be unable to complete even their original duty, they had even less manpower to take up a special task like guard duty. That was the same even for the Mystical Investigators.

But Kagami was free for this role. Though he had the title of an Independent Exorcist, he basically acted alone, and the higher-ups were mostly tolerant of this. In contrast, his fellow Independent Exorcist Kogure would impede the Exorcist Bureau a lot on the organizational level if he were transferred. But ironically, there were no such concerns about Kagami.

Moreover, the possibility that Kagami was a member of the Twin-Horned Syndicate was undoubtedly close to zero. That was common knowledge among all the people who were familiar with him.

More importantly, his abilities were promising.

"Anyway, this is already decided. Kagami's already gone to his task. You can't do anything over here if you're worried about him acting suspiciously. As you reported,

'activity' has already started in the Onmyou Agency. It will be the decisive moment when the victor is decided in a few hours. Right now, we have to focus on the tasks before us."

The operation was progressing right now. Moreover, the key point of this operation was to simultaneously root out the enemies in a short time. They didn't even have a single minute to catch their breath until the operation ended.

Hirata stood still for a moment with a complex expression.

But he suppressed his emotions afterwards.

"......Then excuse me."

He turned and left after saluting.

He left the room with swift movements. Amami, sitting on the chair, slowly narrowed his eyes, staring at the back of his subordinate.



The guard sent by the Agency to guard against the Twin-Horned Syndicate's resistance happened to be 'that' Kagami Reiji. Harutora and the others were extremely shocked when they heard of this. They couldn't believe it at the start. They thought something had gone wrong, or that it was some malicious joke. But when they learned the truth, overflowing anger occupied their hearts.

This was because Harutora and the others had once gotten into an urgent situation after a run-in with Kagami when the spiritual disaster terrorist attack happened in

the spring. At the time, a clash between the two sides would have been unavoidable if Kogure hadn't settled the situation or if he had been a bit later. Faced with having the object of such complications dispatched as their guard, they definitely would have roared 'why is it someone like you' if they weren't in class.

The only comforting thing was that Kagami hadn't done anything like guarding Natsume from close by. He had vanished immediately instead. Was he still in the bureau, or did he think that listening to the Onmyou Academy lessons from the side was too boring? In place of him was a man who had been left behind after also being ushered into the meeting room, but Harutora and the others didn't recognize him.

This man was also very strange.

He had a tall, slender build. It couldn't be confirmed since his back was bent, but he was quite tall, perhaps close to two meters. His long hair was tied up and flowed loosely past his neck. He looked at first glance like a girl, but he was actually a slender, elegant man.



His clothes comprised of a bland shirt and pants. But he held the long package in front of his chest with both hands like a child holding a toy.

His name seemed to be Shaver.

At the start, Harutora and the others thought he was Kagami's subordinate.

"...He's not."

Natsume saw through him immediately.

He was Kagami's shikigami.

"Also, he might be a servant shikigami. The same type as my Hokuto."

A servant shikigami was a type of natural materialized spiritual being that was serving as a shikigami. Though the details varied, it was like making a mobile spiritual disaster into a shikigami. They were much stronger than normal manmade shikigami. More importantly, the servant shikigami of this 'Ogre Eater' was definitely abnormal.

But in terms of first impressions, Shaver didn't look like a scary shikigami at all.

However, his demeanor was a bit gloomy and melancholy. He wouldn't talk actively either, and just silently crouched against the wall during class, continuously watching Natsume with a gloomy gaze. Though this was a bit unsettling, he didn't really feel like Kagami's servant shikigami. It seemed like a vicious monster would be more suitable - a gloomy, elegant man really gave the wrong impression.

"He's like a difficult child."

That was Touji's evaluation, which could be described as hitting the mark. His body deeply conveyed the atmosphere that guarding Natsume wasn't his main motive. But his attitude of obeying his order even though he hated it made one associate him with an indecisive child.

But after sending a text message to Suzuka, they immediately received a reply that they couldn't ignore.

"Idiot! Stupid! Your eyes are useless! I heard that the Onmyou Agency banned Kagami from using Shaver! He's an extremely dangerous shikigami! You definitely can't be careless, no matter what he looks like on the outside!"

Harutora, who received that message, inadvertently gulped, sneakily glancing at Shaver in the corner of the room. The shikigami continued to crouch on the ground while holding the long package with both hands, as motionless as a decoration. He stared over with an unwavering gaze from between his bangs. Moreover, it felt like his expression was a bit inhuman, though in the end it might just seem that way after seeing Suzuka's message. Anyway, Harutora immediately forwarded the message to everyone else and steeled his nerves again.

Moreover, the atmosphere in the Meguro branch today was a bit different from normal.

That Twin-Horned Syndicate sweeping operation was starting in the Onmyou Agency main building. The Mystical Investigators' investigations had even extended through the Exorcist Bureau headquarters, and the normal course of business had been notably disrupted. Though Mystical Investigators hadn't showed up at the Meguro branch, the branch members were clearly uneasy, and the students could all see them visibly shaken.

The Onmyou Academy was still holding classes as usual while the atmosphere within the branch was restless.

Lunchtime came afterwards. The cafeteria was still packed with people, but it wasn't as noisy as usual. In comparison, quiet conversations were taking place at all the tables, and the vast cafeteria was filled with low whispers. Harutora's group silently

traded glances and quietly walked out to the courtyard while holding their trays of food.

They finally relaxed after they all sat in their usual places in the courtyard.

"Today's been so nerve-wracking....."

"....Yeah. Just like Ohtomo-sensei said, the investigation this time is on the biggest scale until now. It's a personal matter to the branch members too."

They couldn't do anything about it. Though Natsume replied to Harutora like that, her expression still didn't look too good. Probably because of a lost appetite, her chopsticks didn't move very fast.

After all, Natsume was the one being protected by Kagami. Just this was extremely unsettling, but Natsume was also hiding her identity and pretending to be male. It was very normal for her to be unable to relax.

Then, Kyouko said:

"Actually, reform of Onmyou law was proposed in Congress. Father was always busy preparing for that bill. It seems also related to the movements against the Twin-Horned Syndicate."

"Huh? Onmyou law is being revised? But why would that involve the Twin-Horned Syndicate? They're not related at all."

"This reform bill permits the Onmyou Agency to expand as an organization. So before that, they have to squeeze out the pus of the organization....."

"....It's like a purification."

Touji muttered quietly, making a simple analogy to Kyouko's incomprehensible explanation.

A purification was a ritual to eliminate the body's 'filth' before an important religious event. Though it was a necessary procedure, Harutora was still perplexed. He understood squeezing out pus and purifications, but he felt nervous somehow - he thought that maybe it was because he was a careless student who knew little about the organization.

"It looks like this will be very troublesome. .....Hey, is Kagami's shikigami still here?"

"He is. Harutora-kun, look over there."

Tenma pointed towards the building with his chopsticks. A tall young man held a package, standing with his back hunched in the dark shadow left by the sunlight in the first-floor corridor.

His unblinking eyes gave off a weak light in the shadow.

Come to think of it, they had only seen him move at the start when he had appeared with Kagami. However, when they switched classrooms, he always changed positions at some unknown time to watch over them. He was more like a supervisor than a guard.

".....So he's called Shaver. Kyouko, have you heard of him?"

"I haven't. But since Suzuka-chan says to watch out for him, he should be a very powerful shikigami. .....Though he's a bit unsettling."

"It's much better than having his master guard from up close."

Though Touji smoothed things over with that, they still couldn't enjoy their lunch to their satisfaction with that kind of shikigami watching them in the bureau's oppressive atmosphere. Harutora's group naturally had much less conversation than usual.

Whether fortunate or unfortunate, Suzuka was out for the whole day today. She seemed to have no classes at the Meguro branch. She would probably show herself after school ended, so it would be good enough if they got through everything safe and sound until then.

"....."

Harutora stared at Shaver out of the corner of his eye while supping his udon. He tried 'seeing' a bit and noticed that there was a light stealth magic cast around Shaver's body. Though he could see his external appearance, he couldn't see his aura.

But right now wasn't the time to look around everywhere. Harutora's hand accidentally slipped as he drank the soup in the bowl. "Gwah!?" He managed to grab the bowl and stabilize it, but his chopsticks therefore dropped to the ground.

"H-Harutora? Are you alright?"

"Really. What are you doing."

Natsume hastily spoke to him, but Kyouko rolled her eyes at him in exasperation. Harutora laughed and glossed it over, then put his bowl and tray back on the ground.

"Sorry, sorry. I'll go get a new pair of chopsticks."

He left the other four after saying this, swiftly returning to the cafeteria.

But when Harutora entered the cafeteria, he noticed that the atmosphere in the cafeteria had changed slightly. He wondered what exactly had happened, but he found the reason very quickly.

There was only one space that no one got close to deep in the packed cafeteria. There was clearly a spacious table there, but no one was willing to come close.

When he met the gaze of the person at that table, Harutora's expression reflexively became frightening.

It was Kagami. He leaned back in his chair, his legs resting on the table.

He seemed to also notice Harutora. With a grin,

"Yo."

He greeted him.

"....."

Harutora planned on ignoring him and moving away from the table, but Kagami didn't let him go.

"Harutora!"

Harutora inadvertently stopped upon suddenly being called by his name.

"Why are you ignoring me? I have something to talk to you about. Come here."

Kagami glared at Harutora through his sunglasses, roughly ordering him to come. It was difficult to keep ignoring Kagami after he said this much. Harutora gritted his teeth, slowly turning and walking back.

He stood across the table from Kagami, keeping a sinister expression. Kagami motioned with his chin as Harutora stood silently. "Sit."

Harutora sat with a stiff face.

".....What."

"Ah? Is that the attitude to take towards a senpai who's guarding you guys?"

"We didn't ask for you."

"Heh. You can talk, huh. Relax. I hate annoying things. I won't go out of my way to kick a wild dog that doesn't understand manners."

Kagami crooked his thin lips into a cold smile. What an extremely hateful person.

"......Since you hate troublesome things, it's fine if you give up on guarding us now. Isn't that even better for both sides? I don't want to be related with you either, and you shouldn't have any interest in us. Anyway, you don't plan on guarding us seriously in the first place, right?"

"Haha. Even so, I'm the one who decides, not you guys."

Kagami arrogantly said those words. The meaning in his words was probably 'I don't plan on guarding seriously'.

Anger seethed in Harutora's heart. He had felt the first time he saw him that it was practically impossible to believe that this kind of man was a National First-Class Onmyouji.

...But, this guy was certainly very powerful.

Kagami had easily dealt with the Type-Chimera that had terrified Harutora and the others. Moreover, that was but the tip of the iceberg of Kagami's power. Not only was Kagami one of the Twelve Divine Generals, he was also an Independent Exorcist like Kogure. In other words, unlike a researcher like Suzuka, he was an Onmyouji whose true power lied in 'real battle'.

"Ah, also. Let me first say that I don't have no interest in you guys. In fact, I'm pretty interested."

"Huh?"

How truly unexpected. Kagami snorted at the shocked Harutora.

"You really have no self-awareness. Why would the Onmyou Academy especially plan a guard for you guys? Your little friend is viewed as Tsuchimikado Yakou's reincarnation. As long as he's someone who uses Onmyoudou, it's very normal to be interested."

"That--"

"Also, your other little friend is a so-called living spirit. Incidentally, you've also been forming a relationship with that goth loli girl Dairenji."

"Wh-Why!?"

Why did even Kagami know about those things? But Kagami continued speaking with a calm face, ignoring the shocked Harutora.

"Hey hey, didn't I say I was interested? How truly lacking in self-awareness. Have you thought about how abnormal it is that a student like you is being matched with a guard from the Twelve Divine Generals? It doesn't matter if it's the Twin-Horned Syndicate eyeing you or if the Onmyou Academy gave me the guard duty. This is a 'professional organization', but they're still preparing this much for a greenhorn brat? Do you think that's natural? Do you think it's natural to get 'special treatment' because you're 'special', so you didn't consider it at all?"

Kagami mocked him maliciously, making Harutora's whole body stiffen. Kagami had already gotten information related to him and his companions, which made Harutora quite displeased. Moreover, Harutora couldn't conceal the wavering of his heart as the circumstances of him and his companions were pointed out again.

Moreover,

"The same goes for 'D'."

Kagami continued speaking. Harutora's shoulders suddenly shook.

"He was looking for the 'Raven's Wing', but why was it that he was meddlesome enough to mess with you guys? Hah, how could that be. Actually, he completely ignored the other brats, right?"

".....So you even know that."

"Did you think I wouldn't know? Even the Onmyou Agency could figure out what happened there. There are definitely even people who know inside the Twin-Horned Syndicate. ...You guys are just too focused."

As he said those last words, Kagami's tone seemed to sharpen. Kagami's unique way of speaking seemed to mix with a slightly different tone.

"......What does that mean?"

"Ahh? Is this the attitude you should take to someone you're asking a question of?"

"....."

Kagami snickered at the restless Harutora.

Scrape. He dragged his chair.

"Don't look so bullied, Harutora. Why don't you use your brain? It's very normal for Tsuchimikado Natsume to attract attention just from the rumors about Yakou's reincarnation. But if that were it, what's up with your current situation? Or perhaps, Dairenji Suzuka. That brat's a criminal who violated Onmyou law, you know? Why is she staying at the Onmyou Academy?"

"That..... Because it's her punishment for that incident....."

Harutora suddenly blurted out, but Kagami said:

"You're an idiot."

He dismissed Harutora.

"What a naive boy. Because she's still underage? Or education in sentiment? I shouldn't need to say that those things are excuses. Dairenji Suzuka is Dairenji Shidou's daughter, you know? The daughter of a crazed Yakou fanatic - the former mastermind of the Twin-Horned Syndicate. Moreover, I heard that what the brat did

was Yakou's forbidden magic, the 'Taizan Fukun Ritual'. As punishment, they're putting that Yakou fanatic's girl who tried to realize Yakou's forbidden magic to the place where Yakou's reincarnated brat is? How is that kind of thing possible."

Kagami spoke torrentially in a mocking tone as if he were spitting his words. Every one of his words deeply pricked Harutora's chest. Unconscious anger and pain ignited Harutora's spirit of resistance.

...But.....

He couldn't deny Kagami's remarks.

He was angry. Extremely mad. Restless. Unstable.

But his words were convincing. Though he hadn't thought of it until now, he truly couldn't deny it when Kagami pointed out those 'unnatural' areas.

"That's not all, the brat called Ato Touji's the same."

"Touji? He's not--!"

"He's not like that? He's just a 'normal' living spirit? Don't speak nonsense. In normal circumstances, just becoming a normal spirit would mean you would be shut into a facility and watched over."

"My dad already sealed the oni in Touji's body! He's safe."

"Who knows? That brat isn't a 'normal' living spirit. The oni housed in that brat's body is the oni that Dairenji Shidou summoned. Moreover, they positioned him next to Tsuchimikado Natsume without even performing a decent investigation. That's definitely unusual, right?"

"S, Summoned..... oni?"

"Of course. The 'Great Purification' two years ago was a terrorist attack. That was a spiritual disaster brought about by people. Moreover, Dairenji Shidou was a National First-Class Onmyouji - a top-class Onmyouji called the 'Professor'. Unlike the volatile spiritual disasters that were spawned during the Nue incident, it couldn't possibly 'accidentally' involve someone. In short, he was 'summoning a god'. The Imperial Household Agency's Lingering Spirit Division was originally a division that researched that field."

"......Summon....."

...Summoning gods?

It was his first time hearing of it. But the instant it reached his ears, a chill ran through his back.

Kagami didn't pay any heed to Harutora's reaction. He planned on continuing to speak regardless.

"Right now, the situation around you is very 'abnormal'. Anyone who can see a little bit would watch you guys closely. Just like 'D'. .....Come to think about it, the current Chief is having her daughter follow you guys."

"Daughter..... Y, You mean Kyouko? She's not planning--!?"

"You're just kids with a friendly relationship, that's it, right? Hah. Who cares about what brats say. I was talking about your 'situation'."

Kagami's calm thoroughness and his merciless manner of speech made Harutora feel as if some hard object were scraping his skin. Harutora gritted his teeth and glared back.

...This guy, he wanted to say Kyouko was a 'spy'.....

He also noticed the hard-to-control anger seething within his body. Harutora gripped the fists on his knees so hard that they hurt.

.....Damn, I have to calm down.

Bickering about his friend situation with this guy was meaningless. Maybe what Kagami said about his 'situation' was correct, but his point of view was obviously twisted, an effect of his fundamental personality. That just proved how extremely twisted this man was.

How maddening.

But he couldn't lose his calm over just that.

".....So."

"Ah?"

".....In the end, what do you need from me. You probably didn't call me to chat about those things."

Calm. Harutora reminded himself while changing the topic. Then, the mocking expression vanished from Kagami's face.

The atmosphere changed.

A gaze shot towards Harutora through the sunglasses. The silence felt like it had weight. This person really was a stupid bastard, Harutora assured himself, but he had to admit that he wasn't just a stupid bastard - although he was certainly detestable.

No matter how twisted and stupid he was, this man was indeed one of the 'strongest'.

".....About Ohtomo."

Kagami spoke in a low voice. Harutora asked back, "Ohtomo-sensei?", seeming to have not expected this, but Kagami didn't react.

He spoke with a tone that he had suppressed the emotions from,

"......In the attack last month, the Onmyou Agency also claims that it was Kogure who defeated 'D'. He was actually the one who gave the final strike. But..... Kogure should have just barely made it. It's a matter of time. In other words, before Kogure arrived, there was definitely someone barring 'D's bath. In that case, simple thinking tells me that only Ohtomo could be the one."

Harutora swallowed upon hearing Kagami's evaluation of Ohtomo.

...Yeah. He also knew.

Ohtomo was a former Divine General, and the fellow Divine General Kagami also knew this. Hence, that was why he mentioned Ohtomo's name when he brought up people who could battle against Ashiya Doman.

"......Very few people know that he's in the Onmyou Academy. But he's been concealing his identity since he started active duty. Let me first check, is he alive?"

"....."

"Answer me."

He just said that phrase. But it was weighty enough to shock his heart.

Harutora forced a smile onto his mouth with all his strength. He had originally planned on making a fearless smile - but actually, it didn't look very confident.

"Of course he's alive. He's still frolicking around."

Kagami grinned after Harutora said this.

"How rude you are to your homeroom teacher. That's called frolicking around? He was your savior. You're so cold, Harutora."

Harutora's face instantly heated up.

"Why did you ask me specifically if you already knew!? There should be a limit to looking down on people!"

"....."

...Huh?

Harutora hesitated. The instant Harutora had roared, the smile had also vanished from Kagami's face.

"......Yeah. He really was injured."

Kagami spoke lightly to himself, making Harutora freeze.

He only realized the situation afterwards and gritted his teeth.

...This guy.....!?

He had been tricked. Kagami didn't know Ohtomo's condition. In the end, Harutora really was useless with these little tricks. It was truly unpleasant how easily Kagami had played with him.

But, on the other hand, Kagami's reaction was also a bit unexpected.

As Kagami talked to himself, he had shown an unconcealable emotion. It wasn't just to confirm. He wasn't just taking a worried tone towards Ohtomo. He held some private thoughts for Ohtomo - not just as his identity as a fellow Divine General. It was a more complex emotion, allowing Harutora to realize that there was some kind of history between the two.

...What was it?

Even if he were a fellow Divine General, Ohtomo had already resigned from the Onmyou Agency and retreated from the frontlines. Moreover, one was a former Mystical Investigator who acted secretly, and one was an Independent Exorcist who

belonged to the Exorcist Bureau. The difference in their responsibilities should be huge. But he still had some kind of reaction. Maybe there had been some contact between the two before.

Harutora couldn't read Kagami's expression, as he was blocked by the reflective-plated sunglasses. The two of them maintained a brief silence.

Not long after,

"......You can tell me the details."

"Huh?"

"What happened in Ohtomo and 'D's magic battle. Make it clear and thorough."

"......Wh, Why?"

"....."

Kagami didn't answer Harutora's question. He just continued staring intently at Harutora.

The atmosphere between the two became tenser and tenser.

Upon seeing that Harutora was still hesitant,

"Then I just need to force you to talk."

Kagami threatened in a smooth and intimidating voice. He wasn't just talking. In the next moment, pain flared from the mark under Harutora's left eye.

Just then, a young girl appeared above the table, in a position between their lines of sight.

It was Kon. Even though she had already prudently repressed her actions out of consideration for her master's position, she had judged that the current situation had already crossed the line. She confronted Kagami with her back to her master, holding

Kachiwari's hilt tightly in a reverse grip. "Stop!" Harutora barked roughly at her during this critical juncture.

"Stop, Kon! That's an order!"

Kon didn't react to Harutora's command.

But nor did she make any further actions.

Since her back was to him, Harutora couldn't confirm Kon's expression. But her small back conveyed the absolute resolution that she definitely wouldn't spare the one who endangered her master - or perhaps a resolution that she would naturally sacrifice herself.

"...Heh."

Kagami suddenly laughed.

He still had his feet propped on the table. He looked at Kon in front of him, his shoulders shaking with mirth.

"You really brought your guardian. Hoho. That's a pretty good shikigami, Harutora. You really are lucky. If I hadn't put up a barrier, Shaver would have already charged over ecstatically by now."

Harutora only noticed that the reactions of the other members in the cafeteria were very slow upon hearing Kagami say this. They knew that Harutora and Kagami were at the same table, but didn't notice the oppressive atmosphere. It was probably because Kagami had put up some sort of barrier, separating their interaction from the outside world.

"There's no reason to read into it too deeply. I just want to understand how 'D' - that mitama monster called Ashiya Doman - fought with that Ohtomo. You, who actually were there, should be able to understand my feelings, right? After seeing that little

shikigami of yours, I take back what I said about forcing you. So why don't you talk too. Don't fake it. Don't worry, I won't do anything to you guys."

Kagami laughed as he spoke.

How inexplicable. He hadn't been able to trust him until now, but Harutora instinctively felt that he wasn't lying. Harutora thought deeply again for a moment with a bitter face. However, very unfortunately, right now was clearly not a time he could easily defy Kagami.

"......Kon."

First was to lift Kon's state of alarm.

After the shikigami heard her master's order, she slowly withdrew while releasing the hand that gripped her wakizashi.

Then, she silently sat on the seat next to Harutora. She stared grimly at Kagami out of the corner of her eye. She didn't dematerialize - that was her bottom line as a guardian. Harutora didn't force her to either, returning his attention to Kagami.

"......In the end, it's going to be limited to what I can understand."

"Fine, talk."

Harutora took a deep breath - then began describing the magic battle between Ohtomo and Doman.

Afterwards, it became a narrative much longer than he had expected.

Harutora also knew that he was a bit over-the-top. When he recalled the scene at the time, and turned it into his own words to be expressed, he became serious for some reason. It was really upsetting that Kagami was the first recipient, but Harutora's speech became passionate at some point, directly conveying the shock and emotion that he had experienced. That magic battle had an important value to him.

Then--

Unexpectedly, Kagami accepted all of the emotion that Harutora slowly let slip.

He had just listened while leaning back at the start, but at some point he had taken his feet off the table and leaned in partially to listen carefully. Even if he saw and knew that Kagami was highly concentrated, Harutora didn't even want to leave out a word.

Now,

"...And then?"

He seemed to be urging Harutora to keep talking.

"Idiot. That's definitely just a diversion."

Actually, he was explaining the subtleties in the magic battle that Harutora couldn't understand for him.

In fact, Harutora had also investigated several of the incantations from back them by himself. Of course, the results of his investigation were full of places he didn't understand, but Kagami - thought it was just at his convenience - resolved these questions.

As a result,

"Hold on. What? Bamboo leaves? He chanted 'these bamboo leaves'? And what he brought out were some things wrapped with pieces of bamboo leaves? Are you sure? In that case..... I know. He was scattering salt. An eight-holed bamboo cage..... Right, it's the 'Eight-Holed Soul-Locking Cage magic'!

"You know it?"

"How could I. It's just the name, dumbass. It was certainly in the records..... Right, it appeared in ancient records, a Shinto curse. But from what I heard just now, it seems to be an original creation of that man. ...And then? How did Ashiya Doman counter the curse?'

"No, Doman didn't know how to counter it. He just laughed happily. Then--"

Harutora was also surprised himself by how keen he was to discuss. He had been unwilling just before - no, right now he certainly still felt a sense of disgust, but the atmosphere still became animated. Even if it were just a portion, only partway, he could feel that their feelings were united. This was practically two boys passionately discussing what they looked forward to or topics that they cared about but couldn't honestly express to everyone.

But.....

"Tch. .....It seems like your descriptions are always lacking in the crucial places. Your focus wasn't bad, but your explanation's too shallow. I'm almost in despair over your brain."

Even though it was Kagami, he had to admit that it hurt to hear this remark to his face from a Divine General.

"Th, There's nothing I can do. I originally wasn't even able to see spirits. There's a limit to how much I can 'see'....."

"What? You said you couldn't see spirits?"

Kagami raised his voice in surprise upon hearing that extremely unexpected fact. Harutora noticed that the eyes beneath the sunglasses were staring at him. When Kagami took this expression, the impression he gave off also became more youthful. Harutora only now realized that Kagami was just twenty or so.

"......How strange. But that makes sense too."

"Wh, What does that mean?"

"I'm talking about your magical energy."

Kagami said leisurely. Then, he leaned back against his chair again.

"Your spiritual abilities are obviously strong. But on the other hand, your use of spiritual power is extremely crude. It's too imbalanced. It's like someone forcefully put shackles on you. Your gears don't even bite. Your horsepower and your gears aren't matched up at all."

His merciless appraisal was like a blade hacking at Harutora's body. But inexplicably, he couldn't feel the venom Kagami's speech usually carried in those rude remarks.

Finally, Kagami said:

"It feels more like a peculiarity of your body than simple immaturity. The Tsuchimikado blood shows up in a negative way. There are often such circumstances among ancient bloodlines that continue to the present."

What a truly straightforward appraisal. But it felt refreshing to be told this. Though the hair of Kon next to him was currently on end, Harutora lightly stroked her head, letting his shikigami calm down.

"Anyway, I'm just a student near the bottom. But I'll definitely become a professional Onmyouji."

That wasn't a proclamation for Kagami. But Harutora couldn't hold back from clearly expressing what he had decided for himself.

Just then, Kagami smiled coldly again.

"Ho, alright. .....And then?"

"Huh?"

"What do you plan on doing after becoming a professional?"

"Wh, What will I do....."

Flustered, Harutora started stammering. He hadn't considered at all. Kagami didn't give up that opportunity, snickering at this academy student with no self-awareness.

"Rather than a brat, you're just a kid, Harutora. It looks like it would be better for you to just go become a civil worker at the Onmyou Agency? Or maybe be a teacher for some brats like Ohtomo?"

"Wh, what's wrong with that? It's also a proper job."

"Ho. In that case, why don't you explain what division your profession will be in. Simply put, what are you going to do after becoming a civil worker or a teacher?"

Harutora immediately lost his words after Kagami asked back with a smile. But Harutora was indeed too naive.

After deciding to become a professional Onmyouji, Harutora had never grown weary of working hard for his goal. But he had never considered what to do after becoming a professional Onmyouji. It wouldn't be strange to be called completely clueless.

The only goal in his heart was to become Natsume's support.

But,

"Let me first say this. After leaving the Onmyou Academy, you will go your separate ways. The world of Onmyouji is a meritocracy. People with ability can climb up, and those without ability will stay at the bottom. It's no use talking about how you're in last place and have self-awareness, the group in front of you is different from you.

Even if you're still convinced that this is an incredible job, you're already walking a different path from those with ability."

"Ugh....."

The words stabbed him. No, he was deliberately aiming at Harutora's weak points. Harutora's 'problems that he didn't want to touch' were practically wide open to Kagami.

"Ah, or maybe it's not like that. You might be taking the opportunity to get in the others' good graces, planning on advancing by clinging to their coattails. I see. I missed that, Harutora. It's a reasonable life skill, to someone who's last place."

Kagami laughed coldly. He really was good at mercilessly rubbing people the wrong way.

Even if Harutora continued to retort, Kagami would just mock him further. Harutora glared at Kagami and held back his words.

But in the end, he was unable to restrain himself from speaking.

".....You're such a terrible person."

It was completely an insult that quarreling kids would use. If Touji were next to him, he would definitely have sighed and hung his head, unable to keep watching.

But after Kagami heard those words, his eyes widened again. Then, he straightened his body and laughed out loud.

"Hey, hey, Harutora. Your brain's no good at all. Do you know who you're giving lip to right now? I could get rid of you in an instant if I wanted."

Kon trembled in her chair, her face solemn. Harutora hastily reached out to stop her. But Kagami ignored their actions, continuing to laugh.

"Hahaha..... You're the first to actually look down on me and give me lip of this degree to my face. But relax. I said at the start that I wouldn't go out of my way to kick a wild dog who doesn't understand manners. There's no end to it."

Kagami stood up from his chair, still not completely finished laughing. It looked like he had already reached his goal by asking about Ohtomo's details.

Kagami didn't say any farewell, speeding away.

But he suddenly stopped before moving far away, turning back to look at Harutora.

"Hey, Harutora. Why don't you just set your goal to be an exorcist."

Harutora was unable to respond, unable to figure out his intent.

"When you become a proper 'hound', I'll be able to happily kick you flying. All the way until you beg for mercy on your knees. .....Otherwise it would be meaningless."

His words and gaze were mixed with happy contempt and impulsive violence. A chill went through Harutora's back. Kagami laughed and walked away.

Kon stood up immediately, reaching to take the shaker of salt on the table. Then, she poured salt out, sprinkling in the direction Kagami left in while shouting, "May disaster befall you!".

After looking askance at his shikigami who was red-faced from anger, Harutora sighed deeply as if exhaling all the air from his body.



Kagami was still laughing softly in the depths of his throat after leaving the cafeteria.

What a merry group of companions. A little manhunt of the Twin-Horned Syndicate members after 'D' vanished was too boring. In comparison, there was more value in taking the initiative to volunteer to guard Tsuchimikado Natsume.

It looked like they hadn't noticed themselves, but other peoples' intentions had definitely slipped into Tsuchimikado Natsume's surroundings. Moreover, it wasn't just one person. Many peoples' plans were entangling together complicatedly. What would happen when they were unwound? He had to be attentive.

Of course, that was also true about the Twin-Horned Syndicate. Since they had determined that 'D' - Ashiya Doman - was a mitama, the probability of fighting against him again was no longer zero. But judging by the movements Doman had made when he attacked the Onmyou Academy, it wasn't the Twin-Horned Syndicate he had to pay close attention to. Ohtomo would definitely be the first person Doman came in contact with next. And the second would undoubtedly be that group.

...Shaver, how's the situation over there?

Kagami raised the level to which he shared senses with his shikigami, directly checking the condition of Natsume and the others that Shaver supervised.

But the key factor Shaver didn't respond.

He was throwing a tantrum again. When the attack had happened, Kagami had participated in the defensive battle at the Onmyou Academy building where the big group of shikigami Doman released had attacked. But that was just a feint. The big game he had been eyeing among the large group of shikigami had run away in the end. After that, Shaver's rebelliousness had become quite strong.

When Kagami received permission to use Shaver and he had been allowed to return to his master's side, Shaver had been eager to go. However, Kagami was never able

to climb to a fully 'active' stage, so Shaver had also accumulated quite a bit of depression. Even if he was quite strong, he was still a hard-to-control shikigami.

After the confusing Doman incidents had ended, Shaver's usage permissions had been lengthened bit by bit. Even if he couldn't use Shaver unscrupulously, he was satisfied. However, it was very dangerous to allow him to accumulate too many negative emotions. Though the foundation of being a shikigami was 'absolute obedience', Kagami deliberately used his strength to restrain Shaver instead. Overall, he judged that his current relationship with Shaver was optimal. Though that was true, the risks were naturally very high. He had to find a suitable 'enemy'.

Even if it was very troublesome, he often had to search for an enemy that could quench the anger in Shaver's heart. In this sense, the living spirit Ato Touji wasn't a bad prey with regard to his 'type', although he was lacking in effectiveness. But no matter what, he was one of the pieces intertwined in a complex entanglement. It would be too pathetic if he were wasted just to change Shaver's mood.

...Whatever.

There would definitely be an opportunity if he waited. If he felt bored, he could just play around with that group of brats to distract himself. If a wild card like him just stayed near them, those people who plotted in the shadow might react in some way. Though the work of a guard didn't fit him..... it was quite a stimulating position.

...But..... That old man Amami had surprised me.

Kagami recalled the meeting last night.

When he had mentioned that he wanted to take up the work guarding Natsume, Kogure had been the first to oppose him. Kogure knew clearly about Kagami's history with Natsume and company, and he was the person who had stopped the two

sides from clashing. It was extremely reasonable to oppose Kagami becoming the guard.

But Amami had instead chosen Kagami to hold this position. In the end, though it was Chief Kurahashi who issued the permission, Amami's choice had been invaluable as his advisor and right-hand man.

...But, this much wouldn't leave behind a particularly good impression of that old man.

The Onmyou Agency was indistinguishable from other public government agencies. The upper portion was a den of demons where various powers and tactics entangled with each other. Amami was the old player who had balanced that situation and kept people from doing as they pleased for many years. It was too hard for Kagami to see through his intents.

In any case, not to mention the actions to arrest the Twin-Horned Syndicate this time, the Onmyou law legal reform that was ready to go after this would definitely whip up a storm.

...Ohtomo. The world might have already changed by the time you come back, you know?

Right now was the time to start probing around. A dangerous smile hung on Kagami's face like a shark hiding in the water as he walked through the corridor of the branch.

But the storm he anticipated would arrive sooner than he predicted.

Part 2

Perhaps because of Amami's persistence, the Mystical Investigators actually found about eighty or ninety percent of the 'suspected Twin-Horned Syndicate members' that they had been eyeing.

Their reactions could be separated into three types. Most of them surrendered on the spot. A few of them resisted, and some of them even attacked with magic, but they were suppressed by Mystical Investigators before harming the surroundings.

The Mystical Investigators viewed the final type most seriously. The people who had instantly noticed the movements of the Mystical Investigators and who began moving themselves.

They didn't put up useless resistance, but rather they used the Twin-Horned Syndicate's network to trade information. They moved rapidly and carefully. Of course, they were probably also uneasy because they had never predicted that they would be exposed in one fell swoop. But they had long since prepared a precautionary system of command for these rattling times. Though their abilities were very weak, they were actually effective.

First, they left their workplaces while avoiding eyes and ears. Among them, there were also some who fled from fright, and ended up getting themselves caught in the Mystical Investigators' net instead. In comparison, the people who gained information from their network would pass through the fine net that the Mystical Investigators had spread around them, which was concentrated at the Exorcist Bureau Shinjuku branch - around the top of their command system, Makihara Yoshitaka. After grouping around him, they started to try confronting the Mystical Investigators' strategy for exposing them.

However, the 'net' they had gotten through was actually one that the Mystical Investigators had purposefully put up. They pretended to ignore them but simultaneously watched over their network.

Then, when the Twin-Horned Syndicate members lying low in the Onmyou Agency were baited into gathering at one place.

The second phase sweeping operation led by the Mystical Investigators formally began.



The moment the Mystical Investigators appeared en masse in the Shinjuku branch, the exorcist Makihara Yoshitaka realized that he had failed completely.

He had been completely toyed with. His side had been played with in the Mystical Investigators' palm.

At the time, he had snuck into an outbuilding of the Shinjuku branch. They should be able to occupy this place and fight while holding their ground, several of his comrades proclaimed loudly. But Makihara took the initiative to oppose them. In this kind of place, how could they stand and fight with their numbers and strength? They would just end up easily suppressed. Most importantly, that would mean there would be no hope for the future. The so-called stand and fight strategy was one taken on the premise of reinforcements or that the situation of the battle would change. A small group holding their ground in front of overwhelming numbers was simply suicide.

Then, a comrade who was red-faced from an upsurge of emotion shouted loudly and hoarsely.

"The North Star King will inevitably awaken if we wait! Then he will descend to save us! Right now is our opportunity to rise against the Onmyou Agency that hold our lord in contempt!"

More than half of them voiced approval. Makihara was speechless - no, he was in despair.

The Twin-Honed Syndicate was a secret society formed by Yakou fanatics. The North Star King was the name they used to refer to Yakou. This was an honorific for Yakou, whose name was written with the characters for 'night' and 'light' and likened to the North Star which was a metaphor for Onmyoudou. This way of referring to Yakou was a beacon as well as a symbol of trust to the Twin-Horned Syndicate. When the name 'North Star King' left their mouth, they would feel an intense togetherness as if they were gathered by Yakou's side.

However, that didn't actually mean that there were genuine ties between the Twin-Horned Syndicate members. In particular, after the Lingering Spirit Division that could be called their base had been shut down, they had only been able to communicate with the most limited means in order to avoid the eyes and ears of the Mystical Investigators. Things like a sense of unity as a group or a matured 'atmosphere' had never been established.

Makihara was an enthusiastic admirer of Yakou. As he was also a lower-level Onmyouji, he respected Yakou's feats and was fascinated with Yakou's ability. He trusted that Tsuchimikado Yakou was the only great man in the history of magic who could be put side by side with Abe no Seimei. Because of this, he held intense indignation at the Onmyou Agency and their blind actions of labeling Tsuchimikado Yakou with the notorious world view of the culprit who brought about spiritual

disasters. He had become a member of the Twin-Horned Syndicate because of these thoughts.

Moreover, he was intensely dissatisfied with the overall magic community. Other than exorcists purifying spiritual disasters, modern Onmyouji received no attention from the world. Even the exorcists were becoming increasingly low-staffed, and the on-site manpower situation was worsening. The entire magic community had become secluded and withered.

But, Onmyoudou - the 'Modern Onmyoudou' that had been developed according to the achievements that Yakou had left behind - had originally been more esoteric and more diverse. It was applicable in vast areas, and was even far more effective than the current system with regard to purifying spiritual disasters. The future of Onmyoudou shouldn't stagnate and decline in this kind of place. Right now was the time for the magic community to look back at the feats Yakou had left behind and study Yakou's ability.

The Twin-Horned Syndicate's beliefs definitely weren't wrong.

But.....

But right now, the comrades before Makihara were calling for a 'holy war'. Where exactly was the estrangement between him and them?

Only now did Makihara scrutinize their faces again.

Perhaps an outsider would imagine that Yakou fanatics were just a group of nostalgic old people. But actually, this wasn't the case. Most of the organization members were young. Makihara himself was only thirty-five, and the others were almost all twenty-some-year-old Onmyouji.

Most Onmyouji, especially the current young Onmyouji, were already immersed in the world of magic by the time they learned about things - when they uncovered their

spirit-seeing ability. All the outstanding people were like this. They didn't understand the outside community and didn't understand the 'world'. Because of this lack of understanding, they packaged everything together and came to unified conclusions.

Makihara had once felt incongruous from his current kindred. During the second spiritual disaster terrorist attack, Makihara had believed that there was no alternative other than sound the world's alarm. With those bitter thoughts, he had watched everyone's decisiveness. That spiritual disaster terrorist attack, which was viewed as an uplifting of the Twin-Horned Syndicate by his young comrades, had been accompanied by cheers warmly welcomed. On the surface, they acted out surprise and anger and even took up respectful attitudes in front of Makihara. But Makihara had noticed his young comrades laughing happily inside many times.

Onmyouji was a profession that the world didn't pay attention to. Even if there were people who would thank them for acting to purify spiritual disasters, they were also asked to take responsibility for damage produced, they suffered criticism, and they were sometimes subject to unreasonable accusations. This was the same for each profession, and perhaps could be called a natural thing..... But there were many people among the young Onmyouji who didn't understand this.

Like the young people shouting loudly in front of him right now.

Perhaps their devotion towards Yakou was just a kind of expression of their 'hopes to be recognized'.

For the great existence of Tsuchimikado Yakou to be recognized. For the kind of strength that was the Onmyoudou he had established to be recognized. And then, for them, the Onmyouji who had used this strength, to be recognized.

In order to fight for themselves and open the eyes of the incompetent world that ignored them.

Then--

Makihara unintentionally put on a bitter smile.

It seemed that he was the same in terms of urgently trying to find a way. They all had various histories and should hold their own ideas. Wasn't he currently someone who was packaging everything he didn't understand together and thinking about them in unison? First off, he had to focus right now to deal with a real problem. Even if he felt estranged, it was he who had led these young people to this kind of place.

".....I understand. It seems like no one has thoughts of surrender. But, we should still choose to escape instead of holding our ground. Unfortunately, resisting as an organization is already meaningless now. We should split in all directions and then lurk, waiting for an opportunity."

"How can we! You plan on splitting our fighting power!?"

"You just want us to run!? We'll shame the North Star King!"

Makihara endured the opposition that flocked in front of him.

"If you're considering your reputation to the North Star King, right now we should protect ourselves in order to become the King's assistance and act. We should beware of that arrogance. Even if the King has already demonstrated a part of his power, he hasn't awakened to his mission. Right now, we will fail without accomplishing anything if we stay here. What is the humiliation of fleeing to those who truly hope to become the King's subjects? Right now we have to hide and wait for the King's awakening."

He could only feel bitter as this time-honored rhetoric left his mouth. When had he started enthusiastically arranging this kind of speech for his comrades? When had these people of his started becoming this kind of group?

He recalled that perhaps the Twin-Horned Syndicate's days had been numbered since this spring, when Mutobe Chihiro, who had been their main leader, fell. No, the Twin-Horned Syndicate had gone astray when the Lingering Spirit Division had been crushed.

Right now wasn't the time to regret. Makihara clearly realized, based on his deep understanding of that point, that he should have stopped them from launching a terrorist attack even if it meant betraying the 'Professor's views.

".....Exorcist Makihara! Even if you want us to escape, we've already been surrounded. We won't be able to get away if we split up and act separately!"

One of his comrades reported. Makihara nodded in recognition of his opinion.

"That's true, if we only flee. .....But don't worry. We'll release several spiritual disasters in the Shinjuku branch afterwards. Then, we'll take advantage of the chaos to escape."

Makihara's declaration evoked a commotion among them.

"We're going to do it by manipulating the aura flow, like the 'Repurification'? But that needs a lot of preparation--"

"There's no problem. Actually, there's a magical tool that simplifies that procedure. That Mutobe-san left behind that magical tool after considering his sacrifice. .....It seems to be a magical tool that Domahoshi created."

When Makihara mentioned Domahoshi, the name of Ashiya Doman, a flicker of hope lit up on his comrades' faces. No one here had seen Doman directly. But, the

fact that he had aided the Twin-Horned Syndicate once or twice had spread to his comrades many times already.

"Unfortunately, that magical tool wasn't entrusted to me, so it's not here."

"What!? Wh-Why?"

"Because he wasn't a Twin-Horned Syndicate member."

That sentence made his comrades' eyes widen. Makihara nodded again and continued to speak calmly.

"Because of that, the Mystical Investigators haven't been watching him, so the magical tool was able to be entrusted to him. But he and I have similar ambitions. I will go ask him to activate the magical tool right now. It still needs some time to create spiritual disasters. Until then, please follow the plan and pretend to be standing your ground and resisting. However, it's just a feint after all. In the end, we want to catch the Mystical Investigators unprepared and then lie dormant to wait for our opportunity. Understood?"

After Makihara decided their plan, he immediately gave orders to his comrades. At this time, the Mystical Investigators had already started charging the outbuilding.

In moments, a magical battle had already begun. Magical energy exploded downstairs, making the outbuilding shake slightly. Makihara continued commanding from behind while using his phone to contact a certain individual.

The other person seemed to have already anticipated this situation.

"It's already prepared. Though I say this, I can't understand this procedure. I can't guarantee whether it will activate successfully, and even if it does, I can't guarantee that you won't be pulled into the spiritual disaster."

"I've already prepared myself for that. Also....."

"......?"

"If it's within the range of the branch, at least it won't cause any civilian casualties. After all..... There are a large number of excellent exorcists gathered here."

"....."

Whether out of mockery of Makihara's words or because of something else he felt, the other end of the phone hung up abruptly after going silent for a period of time.

He was as lacking in emotion and as dour as usual. But thinking back now, perhaps it was because he was that kind of man that Mutobe had entrusted the magical tool to him. Even if he wasn't well-known, the three of them had once been coworkers in the Onmyou Agency. Even in this kind of crisis, he yearned for their first entrance into the agency, when everyone had enthusiastically talked about their futures.

But Makihara's request could very well fail. Right after he requested it, the defensive line that had been put up according to Makihara's orders - their barricade - had already been broken by the Mystical Investigators.

".....No good!?"

The gap in power really was too large. The opponent was a group of specialists in anti-personnel magic. Knowing that there was no chance in victory, resisting to buy time was a useless attempt.

Makihara hoarsely commanded his comrades to flee.

He lit one of the smoke bombs he had brought and smoke quickly covered their scattering. Of course, the entrances and exits to the outbuilding had probably already fallen under their control. With no retreat path, all they could do was run blindly in circles through the outbuilding. It was like they were playing a game of tag.

Pointless death throes. But if only a spiritual disaster were produced and chaos ensued, there was the possibility that a small number of them could escape. So no matter what kind of crisis they were forced into, they had to struggle as much as they could.

Screams, roars, and some chanted incantations resounded through the outbuilding. Gunfire was almost mixed amidst them. It was like a battlefield. A man-on-man battlefield that Makihara had never experienced. Makihara cast stealth magic again and again, sprinting through the hallway.

Just then, the phone in his pocket suddenly started vibrating. It was a call. For an instant, he thought it was a call from 'him', but the caller ID was an unknown number. Makihara took out his phone, suddenly thinking of something.

"...I'm the contact."

An electronically-altered voice came through. The moment this voice sounded, Makihara couldn't help but shout out roughly.

"Where did you go before! You didn't leave any sign at all beforehand!?"

The person on the other end of the phone, nicknamed the 'contact', was an important member of the Twin-Horned Syndicate's network.

After the spiritual disaster terrorist attack two years ago, the Twin-Horned Syndicate had split into two groups overall. One was Makihara's side, the Yakou supporters within the Onmyou Agency. The other was led by Mutobe, the previous Lingering Spirit Division members who had escaped from the Mystical Investigators' arrests. The former was hidden in plain sight, hiding their positions on the surface, while the latter mixed with civilians and other Yakou fanatics, lurking in the magic community. The one responsible for communicating between these two groups was the individual nicknamed the 'contact'.

Moreover, the 'contact' didn't just stick to simple communication work. He also used his individual information channels to assist the Twin-Horned Syndicate. Though Mutobe had once explained that he was a 'person related to the previous Lingering Spirit Division', Makihara himself hadn't directly met him before.

"If this goes on, we'll be eliminated. It's fine if you start now, but tell us about the movements of the Mystical Investigators!"

The 'contact's identity was unclear. But considering the quality and accuracy of the information he had disclosed thus far, he was definitely a higher-up who thoroughly understood the Onmyou Agency, as well as a person with a mysterious connection with the Mystical Investigators. They had to begin the risky escape plan now. They couldn't have too much information.

But compared to Makihara's desperate tone, the 'contact's tone sounded quite indifferent.

"First report on the situation over there."

"Didn't I say!? We're about to be eliminated! We're trying to escape the scene right now, but honestly there's no hope."

"You plan on escaping? Breaking through the Mystical Investigators' net?"

"Right! We have to use this opportunity. Domahoshi's magical tool that Mutobe left behind!"

That moment, the voice from the phone became sharp and asked back:

"Domahoshi? Really. Mutobe-san left it behind?"

"Haven't you heard? It's a magical tool that can bring about spiritual disasters. Using that, we'll cause a spiritual disaster in the branch and then take advantage of the chaos to escape! It should start soon!"

"......In other words, it's impossible to stop it now."

"Right! The Mystical Investigators shouldn't know about this magical tool's existence. Even if one or two people can escape because of it--"

"Great."

That voice hadn't been electronically modified. Moreover, it hadn't come from his phone either.

Makihara had run to the end of the corridor. A figure walked across from him. He lifted his stealth - simultaneously came a roaring sound along with an intense shock that pierced through Makihara's chest.

He had already collapsed onto the ground before he knew it. Since the shock had paralyzed his entire body, he was unable to move - right as he figured that out, his body began to spasm and he started coughing accompanied by severe pain.

The taste of blood. He spat red bubbles from his mouth. He could see blood gushing from his chest. A pool of blood widened underneath his collapsed body.

The figure walked towards him, the phone he had been talking through still grasped in his left hand. His right hand grasped a pistol, its black muzzle still pointed towards Makihara.

"......I didn't know that Mutobe-san left behind that kind of plan. The command of the Mystical Investigators would indeed crumble if they encountered a spiritual disaster attack now. With your ability, you might be able to break the surrounding net. As expected, it was right to come here myself."

"....."

Makihara's head was no longer working right. He could only look up at the person with trembling eyes.

It was a young man. Never mind malice, the face that surveyed him didn't even have a speck of animosity. In addition, his peaceful look was the look of a saint or priest paying tribute to the dead.

"Sorry, Makihara-san."

The youth spoke to Makihara with seemingly sincere apologies.

"Your reverence towards Yakou was different from others. It was extremely sincere, deeply resonating with my own views. But it would be very inconvenient if I let you, who didn't understand the 'truth', continue to escape. Of course, it would be even more of a headache if you fell into the hands of the Mystical Investigators. Even if it pains me, the 'current' Twin-Horned Syndicate has already completed its mission. Please - leave the rest to me."

Then, the youth slowly chanted an incantation.

The pain slowly vanished from Makihara's body. In comparison, all of his senses were replaced by whiteness.

Makihara, who still didn't understand his situation, silently closed his eyes.

Perhaps it was a mistake, but his expression as he died was serene.

The youth offered a brief moment of silence. Then, he put away his pistol, quickly dialing another number.

"...It's me. It's done over here. But there's still a problem. A spiritual disaster will happen in the branch soon..... Right. It looks like a mechanism Ashiya Doman prepared still remained..... Right. I fear that the scene will break out into chaos. But it shouldn't cause any external casualties."

The youth concisely reported on the incident with an extremely calm tone.

Finally,

"Anyway, the Twin-Horned Syndicate inside the Agency is now eliminated. So, Kagami also..... right. I can't stand that man being near his side."

Just as he bitterly stated that.

".....Could you let me listen to that phone call, Hirata?"

The youth - Hirata - reflexively hung up the phone, pulling out the gun again and pointing it at the origin of the voice.

Amami stood there.

He continued watching Hirata with an impossible-to-read face.

The boss and subordinate calmly confronted each other next to the corpse of Makihara fallen in the corridor.

Hirata smiled bitterly with a somewhat troubled expression.

"You really still saw through it. Since when?"

Snap. The fan in Amami's hands made noise as it closed.

"Sorry, Hirata."

Amami stared at his subordinate with narrowed eyes, slowly declaring.

"I'll be the only one asking the questions starting now."

Part 3

The Mystical Investigators only showed up at the Meguro branch some time after the afternoon classes had started.

However, the inspection of the Meguro branch only lasted for a very short time before ending. No intense activity had happened like they had predicted. Judging by this, the Meguro branch probably didn't have any members of the Twin-Horned Syndicate hiding inside it in the first place.

"Th-That's how it should be, right? Otherwise they couldn't possibly have let the Onmyou Academy classes continue like always."

Tenma heaved a sigh of relief and said this after the Mystical Investigators left the branch.

According to some rumors they had heard, the Mystical Investigators' true target was the Shinjuku branch. However, the students weren't sure of the actual circumstances. Because the teachers hadn't said anything at all, they probably didn't know anything related to this incident.

What they could confirm was that after the Mystical Investigators left the Meguro branch, Shaver was still in charge of guarding them. He continued watching Natsume.

...Kagami also returned to the branch.

Harutora, who had just spoken with Kagami during lunchtime just now, returned to Natsume and the others, focusing on eating his already soggy udon noodles. However, thanks to this, all Harutora had to say to Natsume and the others was that Kagami had 'called him over to talk'.

He didn't want Natsume and the others to know the contents of his talk with Kagami - that probably wasn't the reason. As for why he didn't want them to ask, it was

probably because he himself didn't completely understand that conversation. Once he thought it was related with Suzuka, Touji, and Kyouko, his heart began growing restless deep inside and thinking of many bad things. It was like second-class magic had been cast on him, hitting him with a concealed poison. It was no wonder Harutora and the others felt that Kagami was a man to be avoided.

Even though various anxieties filled Harutora's heart and the interior of the branch, the Onmyou Academy afternoon classes still ended safe and sound.

After school let out,

"What a long day."

Touji's tone revealed a bit of exhaustion.

Though Harutora agreed with his remark from the bottom of his heart,

"Very unfortunately, our business isn't done."

Natsume muttered with an ironic tone, sneakily glancing towards a corner of the room. Shaver was crouching there on the floor, looking towards Natsume with an empty gaze.

"......No way, I thought he wouldn't come to the dorm....."

"You're joking. Classes already ended. Let's say something to Kagami and have him take him back."

"Wait, Harutora. Although classes are over, it's unsure whether the hunt for the Twin-Horned Syndicate has ended. They only said it would be over today, right?"

Come to think of it, although they said Natsume would be guarded, they hadn't explained any details about the matter at all. "Ah, really, give me a break." Harutora said gloomily with a bitter face.

"In the end, we can only find Independent Officer Kagami to confirm."

"......Yeah. To be honest, I don't want to get involved with that person again."

However, even if they wanted Kagami to take Shaver away, Harutora and the others couldn't tell where he was inside the branch. Who should they ask - right as he thought of that question, Harutora had a good idea.

"Right! Let's bring Fujiwara-sensei when we go to ask Kagami. That way it won't turn out too badly."

"How could we..... Isn't that too impolite to Sensei?"

"Well, though I also feel that way, but since we don't even know who to ask about where Kagami is, we might as well ask Fujiwara-sensei and try requesting that of him as well."

Fujiwara was a former exorcist as well as a senior. Thinking back to the time of the practical skills exam, Fujiwara had probably felt that Kagami was very hard to deal with as well. But to Harutora and the others, they could relax a great deal if Fujiwara was with them. Though they felt a bit apologetic, they could only ask him to do this as a teacher for his current Onmyou Academy students.

"If we've decided, let's hurry up and go find Fujiwara-sensei."

Natsume, Touji, Kyouko, and Tenma followed Harutora's proposal, starting to split up and search for Fujiwara with five people in total.

Ignoring the students who returned home in droves, Harutora jogged around the branch interior, asking any teachers he encountered along the way about Fujiwara's whereabouts and inquiring everywhere.

However,

...The more anxiously I look, the less I find.....

Basically, Harutora's luck was very bad, and at this kind of time it was essentially impossible for him to complete his task very quickly. He went through the entire first floor of the branch and had already arrived in the courtyard at some time.

The sunlight that shined on the courtyard had already become slightly red. The sun would sink below the horizon after a while longer. The tense and anxious atmosphere that had surrounded the branch for the entire day also slowly dissipated under this gentle sunlight, and the atmosphere became a bit peaceful.

Harutora moved his gaze back down, happening to see Kyouko's figure.

"Hey, Kyouko! Did you find Fujiwara-sensei?"

Kyouko was facing the courtyard's first floor corridor, walking while seemingly pondering something. Harutora greeted her and walked towards Kyouko, and only then did she respond and turn around, smiling slightly and replying "Ah, Harutora."

Kyouko's posture as she turned around in the calm, waning sunlight was inexplicably imprinted into his field of vision.

But,

"Sorry, I haven't."

A wry smile emerged on her face as she answered. It was lacking in vigor, somewhat unlike her original style.

"I see. The other three haven't contacted me either. Could he have gone back home already?"

"Well, who knows."

Kyouko replied to Harutora, her voice a bit empty.

Harutora showed a slightly worried expression. Suddenly, he thought of the topic from lunchtime before.

".....Hey, Kyouko."

Saying this, he changed the topic.

"Uh, have you, been tired recently?"

"Eh? H, How can you tell?"

"I mentioned it before - because you're always feeling dispirited recently?"

"R, Really? I haven't really felt that."

Kyouko wore a smile as she replied to him, but the smile seemed to hold shadows, as if she were trying her best to fake a smile. After seeing Kyouko behave like this, Harutora started secretly observing her again.

"But, we've been having that kind of feeling. Suzuka and the others all feel that you don't have much energy..... Ah, could it be that you have some troublesome business? You can talk to me if you don't mind, although whether I can help is a different matter."

Kyouko had consistently been the mood-maker since Suzuka had joined Harutora and the others, helping to integrate Suzuka into them. Though Harutora hadn't properly expressed it, he felt extremely grateful to Kyouko for this.

At first, Kyouko appeared somewhat cool and collected after Harutora asked this, but in the end she seemed to give up, sighing with a ".....Hah."

Kyouko turned her body slightly as if she were avoiding Harutora's questioning, starting to play with her chestnut, 'halfup'-styled hair with her soft, delicate fingers.

Then, she glanced at Harutora with a shy expression.

".....I... don't seem the same as usual?"

"I guess. To be honest, I've felt that way for a while."

"I see..... Yeah, that's right. I've been a bit down, that's for sure."

"Down..... I guess so. At least, you're practically a different person from when you were talking nonstop during the camp."

Harutora spoke jokingly. Kyouko's face reddened as she heard those words.

"Th-That was because you were so unpresentable at the time."

"Maybe, but you helped me out a lot. Judging from the outcome, we were only able to get along well with Suzuka thanks to you."

"I, I didn't..... do anything that incredible."

Harutora smiled as he saw Kyouko say that while fidgeting, responding "That's not true."

"Also, I'm truly grateful to you and Tenma. Even though you learned about Natsume and Touji's business, you're still able to get along with them like always."

"Th, That's because we're all classmates..... and friends."

"What I'm trying to say is that you were able to get along with us with just those reasons. Moreover, you fought with us before..... I'm extremely grateful. It's great that you and Tenma are in our class. Though I usually don't think of it, it really is incredible luck for me."

Harutora said this sincerely and Kyouko's face became even redder.

"R, Really, could you not casually say this kind of thing to peoples' faces!"

"Hey hey, you don't need to get mad, I was just thanking you."

"What I mean is, when you say that you'll make others embarrassed! You really are a Bakatora."

Kyouko glared sharply at Harutora with a red face.

But a smile immediately appeared on her mouth. That smile was slightly different from the one before. It felt like she had turned back into the normal Kyouko.

... 'It's no wonder the current chief is having his daughter follow you guys around.'

Kagami's words emerged in Harutora's mind, but now he was already able to scoff at such accusations.

He reckoned that if Kagami saw the current Kyouko, he would probably ridicule this as being a play at friendship. He wouldn't understand how interesting and beautiful the 'friendship' that he disdained was, nor how irreplaceable it was.

But Harutora was different. If he couldn't even trust the Kyouko who was smiling before him right now, he'd be completely trounced by Kagami or the Twin-Horned Syndicate.

"Come to think of it, we haven't talked like this between the two of us since back then."

"Yeah, everyone's basically been moving together since we spoke at the camp."

"Though it was pretty effective. Everyone was able to fight as one during last month's attack because we were together. It's pretty incredible that our group was able to learn how to cooperate."

"Yeah....."

Kyouko suddenly shifted her attention upon hearing what Harutora said. He had often seen her react like this recently. Even if she was in a conversation, she seemed to be preoccupied with something else.....

"......Hey, Kyouko, you became dispirited after that attack."

Harutora checked with her. Though Kyouko looked somewhere else, her neck still stiffened slightly.

As expected, that was it. Harutora though that while speaking:

"I'm the same. I often thought of the situation from that time afterwards. Although I said this to everyone, Ohtomo-sensei is so powerful. But....."

Harutora didn't want to pry too much into this matter. He feigned indifference as he asked.

"Kyouko, it seems like you're not quite concerned about the same thing as I am. What else concerned you from back then?"

"....."

Kyouko didn't turn towards Harutora. She just closed her lips, looking blankly at the flower garden in the courtyard. Her pretty profile revealed a seemingly angry yet sad expression in the constantly waning sunlight.

At that point,

"...Hey, Harutora."

Kyouko suddenly turned around. The voice she spoke with was completely different from before.

As her wavy hair floated up,

"Though I've already cleanly forgotten it, do you still remember that promise?"

Kyouko's attitude was very cheerful, but he still felt like there was some problem. "Promise?" Harutora asked back.

"When you and Touji just transferred into the Onmyou Academy, didn't we deal with a Yakou fanatic Mystical Investigator? After that, didn't I make a promise with you? In return for my assistance, you would help Natsume-kun and I get together - that promise."

"Ah."

Harutora gaped, an expression extremely fitting of 'ah'. Kyouko's shoulders shook upon seeing that completely dazed expression.

"You really forgot."

"Well, you see..... Wasn't that just you!?"

"What, we obviously promised. Are you trying to gloss over it now?"

"I, I'm not trying to gloss it over....."

He hadn't thought at all that she would mention something from so long ago - and something so irrelevant. Harutora became flustered immediately.

...Come to think of it, this girl liked Natsume.

Since everyone's relationships had always been good, she hadn't been actively expressing herself recently, so he had completely forgotten about that matter.

Kyouko moved her upward-facing gaze to the unhappy Harutora who seemed like he had eaten a bug. Harutora was reflected in her clear eyes beneath her pretty curled eyelashes. Harutora's expression stiffened and he went silent, maintaining an attentive posture.

Kyouko revealed a mischievous smile.

"Bakatora."

She quietly teased him.

"......Harutora, you say yes to things so easily, but you always end up standing them up."

Harutora couldn't tell how much of Kyouko's soft feminine tone was joking and how much was serious, putting him in a difficult position.



How complex did emotions have to be to create that kind of mysterious tone? Harutora's heartbeat inexplicably accelerated and at the same time his mouth was only able to produce vague responses like 'nn' and 'ah'.

"Th, then, are you concerned about Natsume? But why so suddenly....."

Right, it was time for Harutora to ask a question.

"Ah, Harutora! And Kurahashi-san, you're both here."

In the middle of this wonderful opportunity, Natsume appeared from the branch building and noticed Harutora and Kyouko, so she jogged from the corridor to approach them.

"Fujiwara-sensei's last class seems to be in another place. They said he already went back."

Natsume showed a 'that's too bad' expression and hung her head as she reported to the two of them. Afterwards, she instantly noticed the strange atmosphere between the two, tilting her head confusedly.

"Huh? What's up with the two of you, did something happen?"

"Oh, uh, it's nothing, nothing at all."

Though his expression and attitude were a bit stiff, Harutora played the fool for now.

However, he heaved a sigh of relief on the inside. It was fortunate the topic had ended, or it might have developed in a strange direction soon.

But Kyouko seemed not to think so. Though she showed an expression of not wanting to continue speaking when Natsume suddenly appeared, after that, she seemed like she wanted to get it over with quickly instead.

In a flash, she moved in front of Natsume, meeting her gaze face-to-face.

"Natsume-kun."

"Huh? What is it?"

Somewhat confused, Natsume looked at the serious Kyouko. Harutora's expression stiffened with an 'ah'.

...Not good.

Upon seeing Kyouko's expression that seemed like she had already decided, Harutora suddenly felt a bad premonition. But the atmosphere had already changed by the time he truly entered a state of panic.

Kyouko, with a nervous expression, and Natsume, who didn't understand the situation and blankly looked at her. Harutora racked his brains but his mind wouldn't work. He didn't know what to do and could only watch them from the side.

But,

"What are you doing?"

Not expecting to get cut off halfway, the three of them all turned their heads. That person's face was familiar. It was the thirteenth team captain, to whom they had proposed a mock battle last week.

"Ahh, uh..... Eto-san."

Maybe there was still training later, Eto still wore miasma protection clothing and carried a well-used backpack over one shoulder.

He was a tough person to deal with, but Harutora was truly thankful to have someone who could intervene and destroy their impasse at this kind of time. Natsume's expression instantly stiffened, and Kyouko swallowed the words she had been just about to say. Anyway, they had avoided the 'bad development' that Harutora had predicted.

Also, he should probably know where Kagami was.

"You came at a good time. Actually, we're looking for Independent Officer Kagami. Though he should be inside the branch, could you tell us about where he--"

"You, what are you doing here?"

Eto repeated his question, ignoring Harutora's own question.

His mechanical expression wasn't pointed at Harutora. Rather, he stared at Natsume, the expression on his face like ice. But even so, there were some changes - subtle ones - in the atmosphere compared to during the mock battle. He gave the sort of feeling that his entire body was exhausted and dried up.

No, first off, his attitude was a bit strange.

Eto continued to stare at Natsume, slowly continuing to speak.

"Your admirers were desperate just now, you know? But what exactly were you doing in this kind of place?"

Eto's tone didn't reveal any of his emotions. But his tone seemed to contain a bit of open-mindedness - or perhaps something similar to a self-deprecating mocking. But Natsume was still confused and unclear, with a confused expression on her face.

"......Wh, What do you mean?"

Natsume asked this back, a bit of alarm audible in her voice. It wasn't only Harutora who felt this. Perhaps Kyouko was the same.

...What.....?

He really was a bit different from during the mock battle. This serious, stony man was actually inexplicably anxious now for some reason. It was like the feeling of a

helpless boat drifting on the water after the thin, old rope tying it to the shore had been severed.....

"I'm asking you why you haven't gone to help."

Eto's tone even had a bit of gentleness in some sense.

"Or is it that to you, those idiot believers aren't even deserving of your concern? They're all tiny, meaningless, not worth a glance..... Tell me, what exactly are you thinking - North Star King?"

Part 4

"Starting now, I'll be the only one asking the questions. .....So, first let me tell you something. It was my decision to have Kagami look after Tsuchimikado Natsume in the Meguro branch."

A magical battle was going on in the outbuilding of the Shinjuku branch. The sound of magic incantations and peoples' cries sounded from all directions, but only one part of the passageway was separated from the commotion due to a barrier that repelled people.

Hirata kept his expression calm, casting a cold, penetrating gaze from his eyes and aiming the gun at Amami.



In comparison, Amami held a well-used fan in his hand. He stood there unpretentiously, with no intent at all of defending himself.

"I also thought a lot about what to say in order to successfully trick him. I didn't think that he would unexpectedly volunteer on his own. I never would have even dreamed it."

As he said this, Amami spread out his hands in exaggeration, making a snapping sound with his fan.

Hirata didn't react to Amami's joking attitude.

After a while,

"......Then, why?"

"This operation was in the end just to make the Twin-Horned Syndicate's Yakou believers go to Shinjuku. But with someone like you who had such a grasp of the Mystical Investigators' information, wouldn't the key people still be able to escape to the Meguro branch? Though I already placed people around you to constrict your movements, it's not an easy thing to watch you twenty-four hours a day. That's why I placed Kagami in the Meguro branch before the action started, I just wanted to ruin the possibility of the Twin-Horned Syndicate escaping there. Although the people there hate that person, from the point of the one mobilizing him, he was still useful. He's suitable for 'Twin-Horned Syndicate defense'."

Heh. Amami laughed lightly.

Right afterwards, he tapped on his shoulder with the fan, taking an attitude of treating his subordinate intimately, and continued explaining:

"To be honest, I myself was very interested in how you would move. I wanted to see what sort of ability you had. Though I normally do things calmly, I couldn't help but

wonder whether my instincts were wrong when you were still actively working for the Mystical Investigators after the operation started..... Actually, I was pondering how to apologize to you not long ago, and I didn't think--"

Saying this, Amami's gaze pointed towards the ground.

A shred of pity showed from his expression as he looked at Makihara fallen on the ground in a pool of blood.

"Abandoned so easily like that, huh."

Though his tone was steady, it was full of emotion. But who could tell whether that emotion was anger, pain, or a different emotion. Hirata was speechless and still pointed the muzzle at Amami.

"Well, this is nothing you 'hadn't thought of' for you. After all, you're here because you got here by using the Twin-Horned Syndicate, relying on disposing of things after you used them. I only understood the reasons recently. I see that you had to produce some notable achievements as the person in charge of the Twin-Horned Syndicate. Though you could have just arrested your companions after you finished using them, it probably wouldn't have been an easy task."

Amami put his hands on his waist and sighed, raising his head coldly and staring at Hirata.

With an attitude as relaxed as usual, but a cold light emanating from his gaze:

".....I could understand if it was just because your work was related to the Yakou fanatics. Once I think of how there are still scum like you in this world, I feel how naive I still am. Also, if even you were just a small fry, the roots of the Twin-Horned Syndicate are far too deep. I originally thought of using this action as a final warning..... It seems like I'll have to postpone my plans to partially retire."

He showed a killing intent accumulated over many years as he stared into the depths of Hirata's eyes. Though he was old, Hirata couldn't be careless..... It was as if a giant monster were being spawned from the hells he had experienced and all of the years he had lived through.

Though Hirata's expression hadn't changed, his body still couldn't take it and reacted. His shoulders shook, and he extended the pistol in front of him again as if he were forcing himself to hold on to the gun.

However, Amami's gaze didn't waver a bit.

"Put that vulgar thing away, Hirata."

Amami said calmly as if he were chatting.

"....."

Hirata stared wordlessly back at Amami.

Though he had already aimed the gun at the defenseless Amami, the fact that he had chosen to appear at this opportunity meant that he held the advantage. Hirata lost the initiative and could no longer keep disguising himself. Even if he killed Amami and fled, he would lose his current position. To Hirata, Amami's appearance at this time meant he had already failed overall.

So,

".....To be honest, it's hard to decide how to deal with you. So I'll just restrict your movement for now."

Amami faltered momentarily upon hearing Hirata speak so seriously.

"Hey hey, are you for real? Normally wouldn't you only be able to flee right now? Shouldn't you try to kill me if you're trying to protect your current position - though it might be difficult, you out to do me in like Makihara, right?"

"How is that 'difficult', it's obviously 'impossible'. You should know that best yourself."

"That's why you want to restrict my movement? You want to tie me up and then brainwash me into a Yakou fanatic?"

"I didn't say I would make you into a Yakou fanatic, but....."

Hirata paused, and then said with a voice filled with enthusiasm:

"I'd value greeting you as a companion above all else."

An extremely serious tone.

Amami didn't know what to say for a while. The fan in his hands made a snapping sound. He wordlessly looked for Hirata's true intent - or perhaps it should be described as estimating his 'character'.

"......I'm honored."

Amami's reaction seemed indifferent.

"Well, in any case, everything you're saying is nonsense. Let me arrest you and see what you're thinking in that brain of yours."

Amami spoke naturally. At the same time, he made a snapping noise with his fan.

Hirata quickly thrusted the pistol.

"Please don't move."

His index finger was already placed on the trigger. Amami's smile had deepened as if being carved out.

"...Idiot."

His murmur carried a bladelike sharpness.

"Let me say this again, Hirata. .....Put that crude thing away."

In that moment, Hirata loosened his right hand and the pistol fell to the ground.

Hirata suddenly retreated backwards, his eyes wide - but even that retreating movement stopped partway.

"Wha!?"

The movement of his feet became slow and his body was no longer nimble. He lost his freedom of movement, as if his entire body was being bound by countless invisible wires.

"Order!"

Hirata resisted desperately, throwing out a protective charm with half-paralyzed hands. This should be some kind of magic, so he first tried to break the magical energy.

But,

"Give up, give up."

Amami smiled and spoke. As he finished speaking, Amami's magical energy didn't change, but instead Hirata's magical energy rippled, leading to the collapse of his own magic. After the guardian whose magic was incompletely activated shone for a moment, it burned out and fell to the ground.

Very calmly, Amami said:

"Why do you think I flapped my tongue so much..... I took the initiative to strike first."

"First-class spirit language!? But--!?"

Like its name, so-called first-class spirit language was spirit language classified as first-class magic. It belonged to Imperial Onmyoudou, referring to words containing coercive power that directly infused magic into the enemy's mind.

But normally, first-class spirit language had to include strong magical energy, and that kind of magical energy should carry an 'invasive' will. Moreover, the side that heard the magical-energy-containing voice would instantly trigger their defensive instincts. They could unconsciously form a defensive wall of aura to block the foreign invasion.

The reactions of Onmyouji, who often used magical energy, would be even more significant. Hence, if one wanted to successfully use first-class spirit language, one had to destroy the defenses that they instinctively created. Though there were very few people who could use first-class spirit language, on the other hand, it wasn't difficult for an Onmyouji to defend against first-class spirit language. In any case, if one wanted to effectively wield first-class spirit language in actual battle, one had to be able to instantly form a strong magical energy that could render the opponent's defensive ineffective. Moreover, they had to be as unexpected as possible - only then could they take advantage of it.

But what Amami had just done did not fit either of the two items.

".....Speaking of first-class spirit language, if I remember correctly it should be Independent Officer Kagami's special skill..... This is!?"

Hirata had seen Kagami's first-class spirit language many times. Kagami's spirit language could be described with a template, powerful and instantly effective. If it had hit him, then the freedom of his limbs should have already been completely gone.

But the type of first-class spirit language that Amami had cast was different from this. Its might was slightly weaker - it felt like sinking into mud - and his body still had some freedom.

However, he hadn't noticed the instant the technique activated. It had been the same when Hirata had released his pistol. The weak magical energy contained in his voice couldn't be first-class no matter how he looked at it.

To Hirata, who was gritting his teeth:

"Kagami's spirit language? Hah, don't mention it."

Amami smiled without much goodwill, saying this.

"True 'spirit language' should be even more fine and elegant - a sophisticated job."

He snapped open his fan as he said this, covering his mouth. In that instant, Hirata also suddenly noticed.

Every time the fan that had never left Amami's hand opened, it would release slight aura in that instant. So that fan had been a magical tool. Presumably, the paper of the fan had incantations written on the inside of it. Amami had used that fan to cast first-class spirit language.

But, if that was it, it would have been a very difficult magic to aim correctly. Why had Amami mentioned flapping his tongue? In other words, during his monologue at the start he had already infused magical energy while Hirata was unaware. But the strength of this magical energy was extremely miniscule, so much that even a professional Mystical Investigator in a guarded state would be unable to notice it. It was like dripping a few drops of transparent yet toxic venom.

"Well then."

Amami took out two charms from the inside pocket of his suit. After tossing them out with a whoosh, the two shikigami transformed into the outline of huge blue cats.

The binding shikigami 'Model WA2 Catbandage' created by the Witchcraft Corporation. Unlike the conventional 'Swallow Whip' product which was a binding shikigami mainly aimed for outdoor use, this kind of binding shikigami was developed towards indoor use.

Two blue cats gracefully tread over the ground. One of them jumped in front of Hirata, and the other circled around behind his back. Hirata, who couldn't move at all, was encircled in the front and back by shikigami with no last resort.

"Well, what was I saying? Now that it's come to this, I should hurry up and capture you."

Amami proclaimed with a businesslike and clear-headed expression and voice.

As he said this, the two shikigami simultaneously pounced on Hirata from the front and back.

Hirata clenched his teeth and closed his eyes, as if giving up completely.

Then,

"...Sorry, I beg of you."

With a hum, noise sounded in the space surrounding Hirata.

Lag. Immediately afterwards, two figures completely covered with lag appeared in front of the two cats that jumped at Hirata.

Shikigami. The two shikigami stood in the front and back of Hirata, standing to guard him like Emperors and extending their right palms.

Aura formed a swirl, blowing the two cats flying. They collided with the wall and floor, instantly turning back into shikigami charms. Just that one strike had completely blown away the magical energy they carried.

"Defensive shikigami?"

Taken aback, Amami instantly put distance between them, but his gaze still stared at the shikigami.

The two shikigami that had knocked back Amami's 'catbandages' advanced a stride with heavy steps. Just from that kind of movement, the surrounding aura became unstable. Goosebumps covered Amami's body.

These two shikigami were very strange. They looked like men, but for some reason the rumble of their spiritual power was very powerful. In short, the shikigamis' appearance resembled fugitive warriors, and one of them had hair like an unkempt mane while the other one was bald. Their two physiques were both very burly and they wore tattered armor, with old katana at their waists.

However, the most obvious feature was that the lag assaulting their bodies hadn't disappeared at all. Their aura was unstable and it seemed like their materialization could break at any time.

But even so, the aura that the shikigamis' bodies carried was one that ordinary shikigami couldn't match.

"...Servant shikigami? Hold on, no way, could these things be.....!?"

Carefully observing the shikigami, Amami suddenly thought of a certain possibility, exclaiming out in surprise.

"They're Yase Doji!? How can that be! Hirata, you, who exactly.....!?"

"....."

Hirata's expression didn't relax, because summoning these two shikigami - these Yase Doji - hadn't been his original intent.

".....Since even these two got called out, I can't fight a long battle anymore. Chief Amami, sorry, but I'm going to have to be a bit rough with you."

As he said this, Hirata waved his wrist horizontally. At the same time, the Yase Doji's armor made noise with a crash as they charged towards Amami.

Amami normalized his surprised expression and his gaze became sharp.

"Scatter!"

Amami said as he took out a charm from his clothing.

A water-element charm.

"On birobakisha nagya jihata ei sowaka."

Amami simultaneously chanted a mantra and formed a seal as he released the water-element charm. The hand seal he made was a Virupaksa seal.

Virupaksa, the member of the Four Heavenly Kings who guarded the west, was the leader of the Nagas - the water gods. The released water-element charm turned into a raging torrent of water, spilling towards the two shikigami with a force as if it wanted to flood the entire corridor.

The samurai-like Yase Doji received the impact from the torrent, giving rise to the intense noise of spiritual power. It seemed like continuously maintaining their external form was a bit difficult.

But even so, the shikigami didn't falter.

The bald shikigami blocked in front of Hirata, straightening its body to block the water flow and becoming Hirata's shield. Although the movements of the other

messy-haired shikigami were disrupted by lag, it still cleaved the torrent spilling forth - by drawing its sword.

A giant spiritual power burst forth the instant it drew its sword. The slash first cut Amami's water flow into two, and then even the magic itself was sent flying. "What!?" Even Amami felt dumbstruck by this overly huge power.

That Yase Doji that had drawn its sword swiftly took a step towards Amami.

"Tch. ...Kinji, Ginji!"

Along with Amami's summons, two 'Emperors' with splendid gold and silver exteriors appeared in front of him. The exteriors of these shikigami were a size larger than the original. They were customized for Amami.

Amami used his own Emperors to deal with the opponent's shikigami, immediately and swiftly taking out charms from his clothing and throwing them behind him as he retreated. Then, he started a focused chant.

The magic he prepared to cast was a curse. The opponent's shikigami was powerful, so he needed to use tactics targeting the practitioner. Moreover, he cast three things at once. He took out charms again, preparing to cast charm magic. Then, he lowered his center of gravity to crouch down, sliding his fingertip over the ground. Through the sliding of his fingertip, a pattern formed from magical energy refined separately from the incantation rose from the ground.

At the same time, he ordered his strengthened Emperors to attack. Amami's defensive shikigami charged from the left and right with the momentum to crush the enemy.

However, as Amami saw the scene before him, he paused his chant out of surprise.

To think the onrush of the two heavy-duty defensive shikigami was blocked in place by the Yase Doji - how could that be!

Namu Great Bodhisattva Hachiman...

After a brief chant by the Yase Doji, spiritual power burst out accompanied by tremors and a boom the instant it stomped on the ground. The explosion produced stopped the Emperors' attack.

Though servant shikigami that could cast magic themselves indeed existed...

Even so, this level of power was far too exaggerated.

Then, the Yase Doji took advantage of the gap where the Emperors were unable to move to charge forward, beginning to counterattack. He thought it would cut into the chest of the golden shikigami - Kinji - but instead, it just tossed the giant body of the Emperor away with its empty left hand like magic. Its footwork, posture, and low center of gravity completely resembled a skilled martial artist.

Kinji's giant body crashed into the wall. The still-remaining Ginji didn't give up, attacking the Yase Doji, but with a metallic sound, the drawn katana easily stabbed through the Emperor's armor. Its forward right leg had taken the attack, and lag ran through Ginji's body like electricity as Ginji's movements were forcefully stopped.

"......Oh my, this flashy outer appearance is all just a show....."

Amami inadvertently griped upon seeing his proud defensive shikigami defeated so easily.

But Amami's magic was also already completed. He'd deal with the shikigami later, but anyway, he had to prioritize managing the master for now.

He simultaneously released three curses.

"One, two, three - Order!"

The charm, his hand seal, and the magical pattern drawn underneath him. The curses circled around the forward Yase Doji, flying rapidly towards the other Yase Doji and Hirata that it guarded.

However,

"......It's no use."

The bald Yase Doji guarding its master acted at the same time as Hirata said those words.

It lightly chanted an incantation, and,

Clap,

Loudly brought its hands together.

Immediately afterwards, another explosion of spiritual power occurred, wiping out Amami's three curses, just like the ground-stomping attack from just before. More basic than using magic formed from magical energy, this directly blew away the curses through the spiritual power and spiritual pressure produced from aura.

But,

"...Four!"

Amami slashed out with a blade seal. At the same time, the fourth curse attacked from right behind Hirata.

He had already set up this charm magic when he had retreated back before he had prepared the first three curses and summoned the Emperors. He had made the charm itself into a simple shikigami, and then cast stealth magic on it and guided it behind the enemy. The first three curses were a feint to thoroughly throw off the Yase Doji.

Hirata turned around, noticing something was wrong, but at that point the charm had already activated before his eyes. It was a beautiful sneak attack that he could no longer guard against or avoid.

That should have been how it was,

But...

"......Hey, hey."

The third Yase Doji that appeared was unlike the previous two. This one seemed to be female. Although it was still covered with lag and so it couldn't be observed in detail, it seemed to be a shikigami in an ancient miko outfit.

It calmly held out its palm as if it were feeling a wall, freezing the already-activated charm together along with its magic. The moment after Amami's curse was completely broken, the frontmost Yase Doji that had defeated Kinji and Ginji swung its katana straight down at Amami's head--

"--Stop!"

Hirata ordered. The katana suddenly stopped. But the spiritual pressure produced by the katana swing already forced Amami onto the floor.

Amami was on his knees, supporting himself with one hand on the ground. The Yase Doji's drawn blade flashed with an ominous light above his head, and although the blade didn't move, the spiritual pressure it released had already locked down Amami's movements.

"......Ugh!?"

Amami gritted his teeth, raising his head to glare at Hirata.

Even if his movements had been restrained, a surprising strength could be felt from his burning gaze. In fact, Hirata even paled as he confronted him.

"......I've lost. How shameful, as one of the Twelve Divine Generals....."

"......You're a pure Mystical Investigator. When it comes to magic against people, no one can compare to you. But..... you chose the wrong opponent."

Amami uttered a "tch" at his subordinate's taunt.

"Though I hate to admit it, I have to agree with your opinion. Where did these monsters come from? Could they be the genuine Yase Doji?"

"......That's right, but their origins are a bit different from the Yase Doji from legend."

Hirata replied with this. At the same time, his shoulders finally relaxed. Then, he nodded a signal at the male and female Yase Doji guarding him.

Lag even larger than their bodies appeared on the two shikigami. Then, the miko-outfit shikigami and the bald shikigami vanished. Hirata, left with the shikigami suppressing Amami's movements, slowly walked towards him.

Amami muttered irritably,

"Origins, huh..... It seems like the Twin-Horned Syndicate was just a disguised identity for you. Or was it just a useful piece? .....Hirata, who exactly are you? You're not a normal Yakou believer, are you."

"......No, I'm a Yakou believer, a successor of Yakou's will."

Hirata announced clearly.

His pride and conceit were audible from his words. Amami slightly raised his eyebrows at these significant words.

"......I don't get it, are you trying to say there's a difference between you and the Twin-Horned Syndicate group?"

Amami asked this, but Hirata revealed a disgusted expression, saying "Of course".

"That group just stupidly looks at Yakou like a god, and then one-sidedly embraces and worships him. With their methods, it's like they want to say that only they understand Yakou. To them, they will be repaid as long as they can awaken the reincarnated Yakou - they truly believe that they will return to their past glory under Yakou's leadership. In the end, they make all sort of blame for being unable to realize their beliefs, putting all the blame for their mistakes on Yakou. That group of..... shameless hacks."

".....I thought that was the kind of organization the Twin-Horned Syndicate was."

"It's not!"

Hirata reacted overly agitated to Amami's mocking.

"The Twin-Horned Syndicate was originally an organization formed to accept believers of Yakou's teachings and to succeed Yakou's will, definitely not just to make use of his name! That was why it was called the 'Twin-Horned Syndicate' and not the 'Yakou Syndicate'. Those ignorant fools who fanatically follow Yakou are the least fitting people for the Twin-Horned Syndicate. I don't know when it started, but the Twin-Horned Syndicate forgot about its own mission and degraded itself."

".....So that's why you abandoned your former comrades?"

Hirata tossed his hair, starting to speak passionately with a serious expression. He cast a sharp gaze at Amami who quietly said that sentence.

Then, in contrast to his previous passion,

"Yes, that's right."

He affirmed Amami's question.

"If they were also members of the Twin-Horned Syndicate, they obviously would have been resolved to sacrifice themselves for its original meaning. More

importantly, if they deified Yakou, then it was their desire to become stepping stones to realize his will. Isn't that right?"

Hirata spoke with certainty, and his hidden beliefs could indeed be seen in his expression. However, that belief was different from fanatic worship. Instead, it contained an iron will and zeal resembling a seeker of truth. He completely understood his own words and deeds and acted on the basis of his understanding.

Amami was overcome by his ardor and stared unmovingly and wordlessly at Hirata.

Just then, Hirata's expression became a bit gentler.

"......Of course, I'm not perfect. For example, Makihara's sacrifice wasn't the outcome I had anticipated, and I'll carry this burden for the rest of my life. However, Chief Amami, I still wish to invite you to become my comrade - this is no joke. Originally, I had planned on contacting you, who have a position of influence, in various ways. Though in the end it became this form outside of my predictions - an error of this level can be completely corrected, depending on your and my efforts."

Hirata's torrential manner of speaking didn't have a feeling of wanting to vanquish an enemy. In fact, he was completely exposing his inner feelings to Amami. That was because this was a heartfelt request rather than his attitude being pulled around and interfered with by Amami's calculations.

Hirata wasn't joking. Instead, he truly wanted to welcome Amami as a 'companion'.

"......I couldn't become your companion even if I wanted to while I'm kneeling like this."

Amami said with a wry smile.

But, that wry smile was more like a self-deprecating one. His voice didn't have its former vigor, and at some point, the strength in his gaze had been snuffed out.

"The Twin-Horned Syndicate, huh....."

Amami murmured lightly.

".....Hirata, what exactly is the so-called Twin-Horned Syndicate? Is it a society established by those who accepted the old teachings of Yakou?"

Amami asked this and Hirata nodded.

"Actually, the successors of Yakou's will separated into two groups. Did you know that?"

".....I didn't know."

"One of the groups is the Twin-Horned Syndicate, and the other group was the Onmyou Academy."

Amami was astonished. Hirata continued speaking with a serious tone.

"Chief, you should have known, right? The Onmyou Academy was an organization developed from Yakou's private academy. But it wasn't just the Onmyou Academy that was developed from the Yakou Academy. Just like how the Onmyou Academy succeeds Yakou's will of 'cultivating new Onmyouji', the Twin-Horned Syndicate succeeds Yakou's 'other will'. In other words, we're all actually students of Yakou."

"....."

Amami listened carefully to Hirata's explanation. After he thought silently for a while, in the end he voiced the brief thought "I see."

Then, he looked up as if asking Hirata for guidance, asking him.

"But..... I still don't understand. In that case, what exactly is Yakou's other will? And what's your goal?"

Hirata couldn't help but show a gentle smile at Amami's inquisitive question. His smile made it easy to associate him with a priest or pastor. His tolerance was deeply impressive.

Hirata got on one knee in front of Amami, matching his gaze in height.

"Chief Amami, if you don't mind--"

He said this, full of sincere enthusiasm and planning on continuing.

But--

A sense of wrongness.

He noticed it. Why did he want to talk with Amami in the current situation? He was revealing his originally secret thoughts to him on this battlefield of the operation against the Twin-Horned Syndicate, and more importantly, this person had been his enemy in a magic battle until just recently.

In the first place, he needed to make extremely complex political judgments when it came to the Mystical Investigator Chief Amami. That was why he had first announced 'I'll just restrict your movement for now' in the first place, right? But in the end, what exactly was he thinking.....

"......Hirata?"

Amami called out, feeling something strange. Hirata came to his senses after hearing that, staring straight back at him.

His body was stiff and his breathing stopped, but his heartbeat rapidly accelerated.

Amami stared at Hirata.

"What's wrong? Please, tell me....."

A request with no other meaning.

This became the crucial factor that decided the outcome.

The Onmyou Agency Mystical Crime Investigation Division's chief asked with no other meaning.

That kind of thing definitely couldn't happen. No matter what situation the Mystical Investigator Chief was in, he wouldn't be this straightforward. Because someone in his position wasn't permitted to have naive thoughts.

Only after his brain started spinning again did Hirata think of what he had said in a torrent. He was momentarily stunned and broke out into a cold sweat. "Hey." He heard Amami's voice again. "What's wrong?" "Speak." Amami's words resounded in his brain.

"...Damn!"

Hirata stood up abruptly, moving back from Amami's side. "Restrain him!" He made that order to the Yase Doji who still hadn't lowered the katana.

However, the shikigami didn't move, nor did it even react.

How could this be? Hirata's eyes widened in surprise.

"......Oh my, does it end here?"

Amami put his hand on his knee, standing up with a stern demeanor.

"Though I had confidence in my glib tongue..... I'm guess I'm not too good when it comes to acting. .....Ahh, ordering that shikigami is no use. That guy no longer 'sees' you. That won't change no matter what you say. One has to deal with the practitioner when faced with a troublesome shikigami."

"Wh, When?! No, why, how did I--!?"

"It's nothing, don't concern yourself over such little things. Instead, Hirata, why don't you pick up my fan from over there for me."

As he said this, Amami revealed a majestic smile. Only after the reminder did Hirata think of the spirit language fan. At some point, it had vanished from Amami's hand.

Hirata turned in the direction Amami pointed in.

He saw the opened fan standing on the ground.

The opened fan moved by itself - Hirata's vision was completely absorbed by it - and closed with a snap, somehow becoming two fans. Then, they opened again by themselves - becoming four fans.

"......This."

Hirata inadvertently staggered. A dry sound came from his feet, and when he looked, his foot had stepped on an opened fan. He retreated in a panic, noticing that there were fans dancing in the corners of his vision. He chased them with his gaze - but then he noticed fans flitting across from the other direction. Hah, hah. Hirata's breathing accelerated.

Before he noticed, his vision was already full of dancing fans.

One layer over another. He was dazzled by fans, fans, fans--

Hirata gritted his teeth. He had heard that the 'Divine Fan' Amami Daizen was a specialist in illusion magic against humans.

"......You got me."

When he groaned in regret,

"Don't worry, things went pretty well."

As he said this, Amami tapped Hirata's forehead with his fan.

Hirata lost consciousness, collapsing to the ground right there. Of course, everything he 'saw' - the fans that only he could see - had already vanished without a trace.

Amami gazed at his collapsed subordinate and sniffed lightly.

"Didn't I say at the start that I would be the only one asking questions?"

Afterwards, Amami dematerialized the final Yase Doji that had been in a standby state for the whole time. It seemed that though they were servant shikigami, they almost had no sense of self - or perhaps, they were the type whose self was worn down and already close to disappearing. That was fortunate, or else it would have been dangerous. If those three Yase Doji had been the type of shikigami that acted independently off of their understanding of the state of battle, the current situation would probably have been reversed. Amami stretched his neck as he said "that scared me" to himself.

"Come to think of it, I didn't expect Yase Doji. .....Really, this will be a headache again."

Amami spoke to himself with a solemn face, staring grievously at the subordinate who had brought him so many problems.

Just then,

".....Wh-What?"

Hirata, who had lost consciousness and collapsed by his feet.

His body started being covered in faint lag.

The lag encased Hirata's body like a thin film. It shone like a dawn mist and slowly dissipated, thinning until it vanished. Afterwards, Amami was dumbstruck - a very rare expression for him - and wondered whether what he was seeing was real.

The collapsed Hirata had vanished and become a girl who lay there.

An underage girl who wore a white uniform - seemingly only fifteen years or so old. Moreover, that uniform looked very familiar. It was the uniform of the Onmyou Academy. Finally, she had that unforgettable crimson hair. No, more accurately, it was red hair the same color as the impressive lock around Hirata's forehead.

Amami stared at the girl lying at his feet, hugely stunned. He had never thought the day would come when he himself would be dumbstruck.

".....Give me a break. What exactly is going on?"

For once, the 'Divine Fan' Amami Daizen spoke his true feelings without a single lie.



"What - North Star King?"

Harutora and the others were stunned the instant they heard those last three words.

North Star King. That was the nickname that Yakou fanatics used for Yakou. Harutora knew that, but he couldn't understand the meaning behind using that phrase here.

On the other hand, Eto didn't waver. Although something about him felt wrong, he still stayed calm.

"You....."

Natsume's body trembled somewhat as she spoke quietly. Only then did Harutora come to his senses. He instantly grabbed Natsume's shoulder, pulling her forcefully behind him to shield her.

"You, are you!?"

The Twin-Horned Syndicate? In response to the shocked Harutora,

"......No."

Eto calmly shook his head and said this.

"Wasn't I completely uncaring of you during the mock battle? Wouldn't that be too disrespectful if I were truly a Yakou believer? I'm not from the Twin-Horned Syndicate, nor am I a Yakou believer. ......At least not anymore."

Harutora and the others looked speechlessly at Eto. "But--" Eto continued speaking as if monologuing:

"Their thoughts aren't completely impossible to understand. The thoughts of those 'weaklings' who follow you - Tsuchimikado Yakou."

"....."

Harutora continued to guard Natsume behind him, putting distance between him and Eto.

Eto didn't care even though he was being treated this way by academy students. As expected, he had already looked past it. From Eto's attitude, it was visible that he seemed to feel many things meaningless and past the point of no return. That attitude didn't come from the past few days. Rather, it had come from despair he had experienced bit by bit over long years until finally all he could do was resign himself.

"Have you heard the name Mutobe Chihiro? He's the prime suspect of the spiritual disaster terrorist incident this spring. There's also the Makihara Yoshitaka who's

currently fighting with the Mystical Investigators in the Shinjuku branch right now. Those two people were my coworkers in the Onmyou Agency. For some reason, they got along very well and were always together."

As he said this, Eto seemed to be truly giving a speech. His words carried a nostalgic tone.

"At the time, the Lingering Spirit Division still hadn't been established, and no one knew the name 'Twin-Horned Syndicate'. The meaning of believing in Yakou was hugely different from what it is now. The three of us would often hold late-night talks about Yakou. At the start, I was mostly critical of Yakou, so the two of them joined hands to refute my opinions. Everyone felt more pride about their profession as an 'Onmyouji' than Yakou..... Everyone loved Onmyoudou, whether Imperial or General."

"Eto-san?"

A bit of sweat beaded on Harutora's forehead. Natsume spoke quietly from behind him.

Outside of consternation and indecision, a bit of confusion was also audible in his childhood friend's voice. It was sincere confusion about Eto and confusion at Eto's attitude itself.

No intention of harming Natsume could be felt from Eto. There was no animosity, but on the other hand there was no reverence or respect. It seemed that Eto hadn't lied when he proclaimed himself not to be a Yakou fanatic.

Eto met Natsume's gaze again, a pained smile showing on his face.

"It's troublesome for you, I know that. But..... I still have to beg you for this. I hope that you can understand that there are still people dreaming of you. Please appreciate those who sincerely yearn for you."

As he said this, Eto slowly put the down the backpack that had been on his shoulder.

He took out a slender rod from within.

It was a gohei, but the tip of it had been whittled to a point, and the paper hangings were charms patterned with red and black that they had never seen before. The large amount of charms were tied in a bunch with rope, but it looked more like the corpse of a snake that had been bound by charms.

This was obviously some sort of magical tool. Moreover, it was a magical object with a dangerous air.

Harutora and the others tensed up. On the other hand, Eto also revealed a disgusted expression at the magical tool he held.

"This isn't a good thing."

Eto said to himself,

"But..... The fact that I have to use this thing in the end means that we're not good people either. .....That's right, North Star King. Though I know that this isn't very suitable..... If you could, would you please put a bit of your magical energy, just a small bit, into this thing."

"Wh, What are you saying? Also, what exactly is that thing?"

Harutora roared angrily.

Eto shrugged his shoulders.

"This is the end."

He said this. Natsume made an inquisitive "Eh?" sound.

"Anyway, those guys can no longer be saved. Of course, I'm the same. So this could be proof that we're cutting off our relationship, or as a farewell. Could you please reconsider?"

Eto spoke sensibly. He didn't seem to be forcing them at all. In addition, his tone seemed more like he was pleading with them, but at the same time waiting to be rejected.

It seemed that Eto wasn't pleading them for his own benefit. It was for someone else - for one of his friends - that he had come to beg Natsume. Eto's goal itself was to come plead in someone else's place.

When he saw Harutora and the others standing blankly and not knowing how to respond, he revealed a wry smile and looked to the side. That was the best proof. It was a feeling as if he had been freed from a curse.

Then,

"...Sorry for bothering you."

Eto smiled at Natsume. Not the slightest bit of resentment was visible.

Then, he took the magical tool with his hand and turned around to leave. Surprisingly, his back was completely unguarded, and maybe he had already - no, it seemed like everything was already 'over' for him.

"......Eto-san."

Harutora spoke blankly, still not understanding the situation.

But in the next moment,

Kon suddenly appeared in front of Harutora, her hair standing on end.

At the same time--

Shaver, who had suddenly appeared, slashed his blade horizontally at Eto.

Then, he landed and lowered his center of gravity again. After that strike, fresh blood spewed forth like an explosion. Neither Harutora, Natsume, nor Kyouko screamed. They just stared dumbfounded.

Shaver's expression looked unchanged after he dropped down. He maintained a half-crouching stance, looking at Eto who had collapsed as if dead like he were looking at a tree that he was trying to cut down. His right hand indifferently held on to a katana, but his left hand always held onto a bag - the bag holding the scabbard that the sword had been in until now.

Fresh blood dripped from the katana blade onto the ground.

Eto didn't move again after collapsing. That was natural, as after all his body had almost been cut in half. Time seemed to come to a halt as if it had completely ended.

"....."

Natsume and Kyouko's gasps from behind Harutora's back could no longer form words.

Shaver slowly stood up. His movements combined with his slender limbs gave off an insectile feeling. His body was covered with spilled blood, like an alien organism that looked like a human on the outside. Kon held her wakizashi in a reverse grip with a tense expression, taking a stance again. However, Shaver didn't pay her any heed at all.

Suddenly, an ear-piercing sound rang out.

It was the female branch member who was passing by in the corridor. The books in her hand fell to the ground when she saw the bloodied Eto collapsed on the ground. Harutora and the other three shivered as if they had been jolted away by the scream. Their stopped breathing recovered and their heartbeats instantly accelerated.

On the other hand, Shaver wasn't concerned about the surrounding reactions at all. He just indifferently flicked his sword after glancing briefly at Natsume, flicking the blood off the sword. After that, he returned to his usual hunchbacked posture, leaving the scene and leaving behind the frightened Harutora and the others.

But,

He suddenly stopped and turned back. The object of his gaze was the magical tool that the fallen Eto held in his hands.

"....."

It was visible from the eyes between the gaps in his bangs that he was very interested in it. Shaver turned around again, quietly approaching Eto. Harutora and the others retreated while matching his pace. The other branch members poked their heads into the corridor one by one after hearing the female member's scream. By the time a commotion rapidly spread among the group of people, Shaver was already standing next to Eto.

".....What is this?"

That was the first time they had heard this shikigami speak. A thin and quiet voice, like a child's. He lowered his head to look at the magical tool grasped in the hand of the corpse he had killed, his expression like a child looking with interest at a toy.

Right in front of Harutora and the others' eyes, Shaver drew his bloodied katana again.

"...Ei."

With that sound, he swung the blade.

The gohei-like magical tool was cut into two just like that.

And then--

A shocking miasma spewed forth as if from a ruptured gas pipe.

# Chapter 4 - Higekiri

## Part 1

Shaver was extremely displeased.

He had always been sealed in the warehouse of the Onmyou Academy. Even if he was occasionally brought outside, he was just toyed with by the research and development division. Though his consciousness had almost been in a state of hibernation during the period in which he had been sealed, it had still been unbearably boring. That was why Shaver extremely anticipated the time when his master summoned him.

He wanted blood.

He wanted to tear open the enemy.

Shaver was extremely faithful to his master - Kagami Reiji - in this aspect. Because he was extremely 'greedy'. He had an extremely intense passion for defeating the enemy. He thirsted for battle and for the growth after battle. His master's personality was what Shaver desired. Shaver enjoyed it from the bottom of his heart when he used his strength for his master.

But.

This time, it had already been quite a long time when he returned to his master's side, but Kagami hadn't brought Shaver any good prey. His master hadn't brought him anywhere he could stretch his legs. He just occasionally eliminated a spiritual disaster, all weak little spiritual disasters that were the pinnacle of boring.

Originally, he could have fought with that Ashiya Doman. But he hadn't been told to, even though he waited for a long time. When the Onmyou Academy had been attacked, he had managed to chase after an oni that looked pretty strong, but they

had been summoned back partway. In the end, even Ashiya Doman himself had been stolen away by someone else. It seemed that his master felt extremely satisfied about that opponent being still alive, but he didn't plan on fighting him at all. What was going on? It shouldn't be like this, right?

Shaver was extremely displeased.

Moreover, he was extremely restless.

At the start, he had grumbled complaints to his master, but recently he hadn't even been complaining. He hadn't given up, he was just tired. Shaver no longer even had the energy to express himself to his master. All he could do was give off a gloomy attitude to convey his displeasure.

Meaningless. Meaningless.

So boring. So boring.

The order he had received today was the same. To think he was guarding children. It wasn't like an order his master would give at all. Though he had said Ashiya Doman would probably show up, Shaver wouldn't be fooled again this time. No matter what, Ashiya Doman had already been defeated by someone else. He didn't know whether those Twin-Horned Syndicate people would come or not or whether he could expect much out of them.

But, Shaver was Kagami's shikigami. He had to obey his master's instructions.

Hence, Shaver could only endure, stifle his emotions, and mechanically do his duty.

But what was surprising was the kid that he had to protect, along with the ones surrounding him.

Shaver felt an extremely rare air from the human named Tsuchimikado Natsume. He had always been thinking about what exactly it was, but after a long time he had finally thought of it.

It was probably a dragon. Moreover, it wasn't the manmade kind, it was a true dragon. Shaver had lived for a very long time, but he had only seen true dragons one or two times before. Also, he hadn't fought with a dragon at all before. Curiosity burned in Shaver's heart. What kind of things were dragons? And how would it 'taste' to battle with one?

There was also someone else. The human named Ato Touji who was with Tsuchimikado Natsume.

In contrast, there was no question about that one. Ato Touji's body carried the flavor that Shaver loved most. Oni. Though there was a seal placed in his body, he was probably a so-called living spirit judging from the feel of it.

But, though he was a partial product, the smell from his body was quite intense. Moreover, Shaver felt it slightly familiar. What kind of oni was the one in his body? It was so interesting. Moreover, Shaver himself was 'hungry'.

But Kagami had probably thought that Shaver would have this reaction beforehand. He had strictly prohibited Shaver from interacting with the one he was guarding. Thanks to that, Shaver's mood had already worsened to the limit - needless to say, he reluctantly continued doing his duty while suppressing himself from exploding.

Anyway, it was definitely going to be nothing again. That's what Shaver thought.

But there was finally activity when the sun had almost set.

A man came in contact with the one he was guarding, Tsuchimikado Natsume. Though he had said he wasn't in the Twin-Horned Syndicate, that was impossible. He was definitely part of the Twin-Horned Syndicate.

But, a bit of mischief rose in Shaver's heart. He didn't instantly get rid of that man. Instead, he watched for a bit.

Maybe Tsuchimikado Natsume would summon the dragon. Maybe Ato Touji would hurry to her and show his living spirit form. In that case, it would be more interesting to let them go a bit out of control. Kagami wouldn't complain about anything as long as he protected them like before in the end.

Shaver hid himself in a somewhat distant area, silently watching the situation unfold. He almost saw the situation he was anticipating finally happen when that man wanted to take something out.

But in the end, reality betrayed his expectations.

That man moved away, his back to Natsume and the others. He just left. Shaver was dejected.

Tch, whatever.

He jumped out and cut the man to death.

After killing the man, Shaver suddenly realized that, ah, it might have been better not to kill him. Maybe Kagami would be mad later. But he wasn't so concerned. In any case, he had always been dissatisfied, and there was no helping killing someone. It looked like he had been enduring for way too long and had already approached his limits. Everything was Kagami Reiji's fault. That's what Shaver thought.

After dealing with the enemy, Shaver turned his attention to the thing that man had taken out.

It was a magical tool. Moreover, it was a magical tool that Shaver had never seen. Even if the master died, it still gave off an ominous air. It was dyed with its master's blood, as if waiting for a new master.

Shaver became interested.

"......What is this?"

He walked closer to look carefully. There seemed to be something contained inside the magical tool.

What exactly was it?

Shaver slashed at the magical tool out of curiosity.

Part 2

"Harutora-sama!"

Kon cried out, crashing into Harutora. She pushed Harutora along with Natsume behind him over. At the same time, she grabbed the arm of Kyouko who stood next to them, forcing them down.

In that moment, the magical tool that Shaver had destroyed spewed out an intense miasma.

Fortunately, the miasma didn't spew out in all directions, or else the people closest to the spewing miasma would probably have died immediately. But even so, the miasma instantly made one feel like vomiting and made them almost lose consciousness. It was far removed from when they had fought the Nue. Everyone felt their body temperature drop several degrees in a flash.

They still didn't know what had happened. However, Natsume had already chanted "Order" as if screaming and put up a protective charm defensive wall as she lay on the floor. Harutora also gritted his teeth, pulling Natsume and Kyouko away.

All around them were people who had collapsed after being hit by the miasma and people who screamed loudly but didn't know where to flee. It was a hellish scene. After Natsume put up a protective charm, she cast magic on Harutora, Kyouko, and Kon, apparently a magic that raised their miasma resistance. Everyone felt that their breathing smoothed out quite a bit. Harutora didn't have time to thank her, hastily trying to 'see' the source of the miasma.

Fearsome, high-density miasma was being spewed into the air, and moreover it also seemed that it wasn't just miasma there. It was also mixed with some kind of manmade magical energy. The magic cast on the magical tool had been destroyed, leading to the entire magical tool exploding.

Shaver, who had destroyed the magical tool, was completely covered in the spewing miasma. His entire body was engulfed in miasma, and they could barely see his outline. It was as if he were standing on top of a geyser.

"Damn! Natsume, Kyouko, are you alright?"

"That was dangerous! Thank you, Kon!"

"What's going on? What is this?"

Someone had been killed right in front of him, and now a storm of miasma. It was very difficult to remain calm, but his life would be in danger as soon as he panicked. Right now, the most important thing was to escape as soon as possible and reach a safe place.

But,

"H-Harutora-sama! This miasma seems like it will go underground. Please be careful! If this goes on, the spirit flow will--"

Right as Kon said that, a rumbling noise sounded from underground and their footing became unstable. It seemed like an earthquake, but it wasn't an earthquake. Harutora's group had had a similar experience before.

As the underground rumbling continued without stopping, the earth split in two and a large amount of aura burst forth from below the bricks, soil, flower garden, and courtyard pond. Aura also poured from the bureau building floor where they had originally planned on fleeing into. Geysers of aura sprang up one after another, at least within the confines of the branch.

Though on the other hand, it was like they were being bathed in fire. The scene before them lacked a sense of reality. It felt like a Hollywood film.

Then, the aura bursting upwards merged and coagulated with the miasma pervading the surroundings, spawning a new miasma.

A spiritual disaster.

The spiritual disaster grew and swelled rapidly. In a flash, the spiritual disaster's level had already quickly risen from Phase One to Phase Two to Phase Three. The situation rapidly deteriorated. It was like salt crystallizing in a supersaturated saline solution.

After the miasma materialized, it started moving. It birthed 'demons', mobile spiritual disasters. Moreover, it wasn't just one. There was a monster like a snake merged with insects, along with a giant bent-horned spider. Finally, there was a moving clod of earth with one eye. The first two were a 'Type-Worm' and a 'Type-Spider'. The final one was a 'Type-Cyclops'. All of the mobile spiritual disasters were more than five meters tall. Three in total, and moreover three spiritual disasters with different forms had appeared in the same place.

In normal circumstances, such a scene would be impossible. Though each one was on a slightly smaller scale than a naturally occurring spiritual disaster, that fact wasn't enough to feel thankful for. There was only despair before them.

...No way.....

Harutora's breath stopped because of the scene before him and he went speechless.

His mind was paralyzed and he couldn't think normally. He knew that he should move, but he couldn't think of how to. Moreover, it wasn't just Harutora. Natsume and Kyouko were the same. In addition, everyone in the branch had about the same feeling for a moment.

But,

"Come, Hokuto!"

Natsume called out.

Though her voice was clearly terrified, she desperately mustered as much courage as she could and bravely stood forth. Then, a dazzling golden line of light appeared with an awe-inspiring sound. As if lighting the fire of hope, it appeared in the sky carrying a vibrant energy.

The golden scales over its body bathed in the sunlight like gems, burning like fire. Its ferocious roar sounded like a warrior's in the miasma-filled courtyard.

A dragon.

The Tsuchimikado guardian spirit as well as Natsume's shikigami, Hokuto.

Though it was normally playful, idle, and willful, not like a shikigami at all. But right now, it readily revealed its fangs and attacked the twisted humanoid mass of earth below it - the 'Type-Cyclops' - the moment it was summoned.

Then, the shikigami crashed into the spiritual disaster.

"Hurry, take shelter!"

Natsume called out.

"This is the Exorcist Bureau. Though it's chaotic right now, there will be exorcists here right away to eliminate the spiritual disaster. The first thing we have to do is ensure our own safety! Hurry and group up with Touji and Tenma. Then, if there are still students left behind, get them to evacuate. Harutora, Kurahashi-san, do you understand?"

Natsume's voice shook slightly. Her eyes were full of anxiety and panic.

But Natsume still suppressed her fear, forcing herself to act.

...Yes.

The attack that the academy had received last month awoke in his mind. It had been Natsume who commanded Harutora's group when they had been surrounded by Doman's shikigami. At that time, Harutora's group had gathered together to fight under Natsume's instructions.

"......Okay!"

Harutora urged himself on.

Just as Natsume said, they should leave eliminating the spiritual disaster to the professionals. Even if he flailed around here, he would just hold back the others.

"Kon, sorry, but go find Touji and Tenma quickly. Especially Touji. The oni in his body might go out of control again in this kind of miasma."

"Right, we have to be concerned about that too. We should hurry too. Kurahashi-san, use your defensive shikigami."

"G-Got it!"

Harutora commanded Kon while Kyouko summoned her two defensive shikigami after hearing Natsume's instructions.

But,

"Harutora-sama!"

Harutora turned to look upon hearing Kon's cry. The spiritual disaster that had formed in the courtyard pond was approaching Harutora's group.

Its body, like a small mountain, was covered in wet black fur and it grew a number of legs segmented like knuckles. Its entire body looked like a big spider, but it had a protrusion like a face on which there were two curved horns.

A 'Type-Spider', a mobile spiritual disaster also known as an ushi-oni.

"H-Hakuou! Kokfuu!"

Kyouko shrilly ordered her guards to defend. Kyouko's defensive shikigami were 'Model G2 Yaksha'. They were more slender than 'Emperors', and although they looked like reliable knights when they stood next to Harutora's group, they seemed exceptionally small in front of the giant mobile spiritual disaster. Like infantry facing off against a tank. Though Kokfuu's spear pierced into the ushi-oni's body and Hakuou cut apart one of the ushi-oni's legs, its giant body didn't stop approaching.

"Damn, get away!"

After the three of them ran towards the corridor in a panic, the spiritual disaster's giant body crashed into the wall of the bureau building. Dust scattered and the ushi-oni broke through the corridor while chasing Harutora's group. Though Harutora tossed a protective charm behind him, the ushi-oni broke through the barrier directly. The ushi-oni broke open the walls with a rumbling sound as the spiritual disaster pursued Harutora's group.

"This is bad! Hokuto! Hurry up and come here--!"

Though Natsume shouted into the air, Hokuto was still locked in combat with the 'Type-Cyclops'. It was in a bitter struggle because it didn't have its master's instructions. Though Harutora and Kyouko did their best to fight with charms, the ushi-oni didn't even look hurt.

"N-No good! Dodge it!"

Harutora's group changed directions, dodging into the courtyard to avoid the ushi-oni's charge. The moment they dodged, Harutora brushed into the miasma brought by the spiritual disaster and was momentarily assaulted by chills. But Harutora still

'watched' the enemy without dropping his guard. He watched the miasma that the spiritual disaster gave rise to.

His left eye hurt again. But Harutora saw through it. Though the yin and yang were extremely unbalanced, it was water aura that formed the ushi-oni's body. He couldn't judge by its outer appearance. The true body of this spiritual disaster was a turbid, chaotic swirl of water aura.

"...Stop! Order!"

He threw out a fire-element charm along with an earth-element charm. When the earth-element charm absorbed the flame of the fire-element charm and activated, he made the earth-element charm burst open. This was the Five Element Mutual Generation that he had used in the mock battle the day before. Then, he used the earth aura to suppress the water aura. Five Element Conquering.

It was effective.

The things that covered the surface of the ushi-oni's body, the things that looked like wet hairs, were actually flowing strands of sewage like jellyfish tentacles. When the hairs were hit by the charm's earth aura, they slowly dried up. Then, they flaked off like dried-up bits of earth. The turbid water in the ushi-oni's body flowed out with a squelch. The ushi-oni's body shuddered and its spider-like legs began to twitch.

But, that was all the effect it had.

The turbid water that flowed like blood instantly stopped. The wound solidified like a scab. The water that dripped out became black hairs, quickly blocking the wound. "Damn!" Harutora cursed and gritted his teeth.

Moreover, the other spiritual disaster was also charging at Harutora's group as they escaped to the courtyard.

It resembled a long belt upon which a giant mouth had been attached. The snakelike and insectile monster crashed into the trees in the courtyard while crawling around the ground, its mouth large enough to swallow the standing Harutora whole. Its body, covered in decaying moss, vines, and weeds, also released a stench separate from its miasma.

A nozuchi, also called a 'Type-Worm'.

"N-Natsume-kun!?"

Kyouko shrilly called forth Hakuou and Kokfuu. But as expected, two defensive shikigami couldn't stop a mobile spiritual disaster. The difference in mass was too great.

"You two, hurry up and retreat! ...Order."

Natsume brought forth her aura, throwing out four charms as if striking the ground. Metal-element charms. Long, pointed pieces of metal burst from the ground one after another, becoming a fence that blocked the nozuchi. He saw with his 'vision' that the nozuchi was a spiritual disaster of wood aura. The metal-element charm was effective according to the concept that metal conquered wood. Actually, the nozuchi also reacted as if it didn't want to touch the metal aura fence.

But, that was only temporary. The nozuchi instantly twisted its body, going around to pursue Harutora's group. Though Harutora threw a protective charm at its nose to try drive it off, the nozuchi still slowly yet surely shortened its distance from Harutora's group.

Moreover, the ushi-oni behind them had already recovered and was eyeing Harutora's group, once again adjusting its direction.

"Ah, Damn! Why are they all focused on us!?"

Could it be the Twin-Horned Syndicate's resentment for being chased by the Mystical Investigators? What a resentment it was, if that were true. Anyway, it was extremely bad to be pincered from the front and back like this. The grieving Harutora ran while gasping roughly for breath. But it was difficult to escape the branch just running for their lives like this.

"Really! It was like this with the Nue too, why does a student like me have to deal with Phase Three spiritual disasters!?"

Hokuto had been their main fighting force when they faced the Nue, and Kogure's crow tengu shikigami had also helped them out. It had been Natsume's charm magic that decided victory, and Harutora had basically been just throwing charms.

...Come to think of it, I don't even know methods of dealing with spiritual disasters!

Harutora ran while looking at Hokuto. Hokuto was currently still battling against the one-eyed spiritual disaster. Though it definitely held the advantage, it still wasn't free to help them.

Just then,

"Aah!"

Kyouko's foot slipped. "Kyouko!" Harutora instantly picked up Kyouko. As he turned around, he saw that the trees in the courtyard were rustling as if they were alive. It seemed that they had transformed into spiritual disasters after becoming tainted by miasma. Moreover, they had almost reached the Phase Two stage.

Though Kon immediately threw foxfire at the trees, only a few branches caught flame. If they just let them be, they would definitely become spiritual disasters later. Moreover, it wasn't just the trees that were transforming to spiritual disasters. If this went on, there would be more spiritual disasters occurring. The spiritual disaster

chain reaction that was appearing before them had already reached Phase Four, the Hyakki Yagyou.

Natsume also instantly paused upon seeing the two of them stop. Tossing her hair behind her back. Natsume readied charms in her hands while revealing a nervous expression.

She probably planned on using charm magic to check the pursuing ushi-oni and nozuchi. At least she could delay them for some time. But if this repeated, her spiritual power would be exhausted very quickly.

...Damn. Spiritual disasters..... With mobile spiritual disasters as opponent.....

Harutora suddenly had a flash of inspiration.

He had a magic meant for spiritual disasters. He had heard that incantation and then secretly investigated and memorized it. He had also seen the magic first-hand before. Of course, he hadn't tried it yet - but he could only learn if it could work by trying.

"Natsume! Make a pentagram with five charms!"

Releasing Kyouko from his arms. Harutora shouted at Natsume.

"...Ban, un, taraku, kiriku, aku! Connect the five elements, Order!"

Natsume moved stiffly but quickly answered Harutora's request and changed her magic. Metal, wood, water, fire, earth; all of the five elements were released alongside the chanted incantation. The charms instantly released light. The lights merged together, drawing a dazzling pentagram in the air.

This incantation itself was already a strong defensive charm magic.

But Harutora had other intentions.

...Will it work.....!?

No, it had to work. Harutora desperately thought of the magic he had seen that day in his mind.

"...G-God of the east sea, Amei! God of the west sea, Shukuryou! God of the south sea! Kyojou! God of the north sea, Gukyou! Gods of the four seas, fend off a hundred demons and drive back the fierce disaster! Order!"

Natsume abruptly turned her head. Kyouko suddenly gaped.

That was the Imperial-style incantation that Harutora had laboriously searched for information about and managed to find in specialized exorcist books. It was like a little boy doing his best to memorize the name of a hero's certain-death technique. Though he was embarrassed, he still remembered it. Harutora had heard this incantation at that time.

Ohtomo had used this against Doman. A magic to fend off the Hyakki Yagyou.

An intense pain like nails digging into him came from his left eye as well as deep in his brain. But, Harutora endured it, desperately focusing his consciousness on developing the magic.

Focus.

But,

.....No good!?

The magical energy he had gathered should have been enough. He hadn't developed the magic incorrectly either.

But, it wasn't accurate enough.

The details of the magic were extremely fuzzy.

It was finally Harutora's first time using Imperial Onmyoudou. Though there was some distance from the constantly approaching ushi-oni and nozuchi, they had already slowed somewhat.

But that was it. The magic's balance had crumbled long ago, vanishing as if it dissolved. The five charms Natsume had prepared also fell to the ground.

"......Ugh."

It was too hard to use right away in a real battle. It was a magic from the Imperial-style, not even from the General-style.

But,

...No. I used it wrong.

Harutora blamed himself again. He hadn't 'seen' the magic clearly. He hadn't clearly felt the nature of the magic. He hadn't thought that 'not seeing clearly' would make him feel this bad.

"Harutora-sama."

Harutora felt faint because of the effects of wasting his magical energy. Kon hastily supported her master's body.

On the other hand. The two spiritual disasters moved again. They could only flee. Flee, flee..... But how long could they flee for?

Just then.

The nozuchi's actions suddenly stopped. It stopped as if it were afraid of something.

But the ushi-oni started spasming dramatically.

Slash! The ushi-oni's body suddenly split and the filthy water they had just seen gushed out.

It was completely incomparable to when it had received Harutora's attack. Its body was almost cut into two halves and the water aura composing its body almost all spewed out. The swirl of muddy, dirty water aura had been completely cut apart.

The water aura that formed the ushi-oni crumbled.

A figure appeared as it nimbly jumped on that giant body.

The figure landed in a crouch. Because the cord that had tied his hair together had been cut, his unkempt hair was scattered messily. His slender figure was covered with blood and dust, and one long arm held onto a sharp katana as it dangled lazily by his side.

Red, girlish lips were curved joyously below the bangs that stuck to his forehead.

It was Shaver.

But this appearance was different from before. The shikigami's shoulders swayed, his entire body shaking like a stumbling drunk.

"......You, you....."

Just as Harutora spoke in a low, shaking voice, Shaver suddenly raised his head to look at Harutora.

Everyone in Harutora's group trembled.

Shaver was smiling. Moreover, it was an incredibly happy smile. His eyes swam around and his lips trembled, his smile looking so strange that it gave them chills. That was the smile of a slavering wolf. The smile of a wild beast drunk on fresh blood.

Harutora and his companions were scared stunned by this daring violence that seemed as if might gush out at any moment.

Shaver stared intently at Harutora and his companions, saying in a high-pitched voice:

"No! How could you play with this kind of thing? It's so boring, so weak! It won't do! I waited so long! Play with me first if you want to play!"

Shaver leaped like an excited monkey, landing on the ground. The force of his landing made the ushi-oni under his feet vanish as if it had been stomped on. Though that slash had also been a reason. But in the end, the ushi-oni had been crushed to death by Shaver's spiritual pressure. Though Shaver's body was slender and his body type was far removed from the ushi-oni's, the aura released from Shaver's body was too strong.

And now, this aura turned fiercely in another direction. He was like a cup that was being tilted enough for the water inside to pour out. That kind of almost-bursting, spine-chilling feeling of unease was the embodiment of Shaver's madness.

This servant shikigami was currently transforming into a spiritual disaster.

"This guy!?"

He remembered the magical tool that had brought about this spiritual disaster. Shaver had been showered in the high-density miasma that gushed out of that magical tool from a close distance. In the first place, servant shikigami were spiritual entities almost identical to spiritual disasters. It wasn't anything strange for his nature to change upon being hit directly by miasma carrying that kind of magical energy.

...This is bad!

The moment Harutora thought that, Shaver kicked off the ground and leaped towards them.

The intense fighting spirit and destructive impulse became a blast and assaulted Harutora and his companions. Harutora thought he was dead for a moment. The approaching smile and the aura that touched his skin. The trail of the katana slash flashed in the corner of his vision.

But,

Bang!

A different blast came from the other side.

A golden light caused the blast - Hokuto. Shaver was struck violently by the dragon and was sent flying before Harutora's group. If they turned around, they would have seen the one-eyed spiritual disaster Hokuto had been locked in combat with collapsed there. Though it hadn't been eliminated completely, it was already close to half-destroyed. Hokuto had broken out of the fight to come save its master from her crisis the moment it had been giving the enemy the final blow.

The shikigami's aid made it right on time.

But, Shaver defended against this surprise attack.

"Uwah! How powerful!"

Shaver blocked Hokuto's fangs with the blade of his katana to defend against the ferocious collision. His left arm pressed against the sword back and his legs were braced firmly against the ground as he forcefully resisted Hokuto's impact head-on.

Craaack. Two long trails were carved into the ground by the time the two finally stopped moving.

The humanoid Shaver had defended against the giant dragon's attack head-on. This scene was so abnormal and inexplicable. Even Hokuto, who had given that blow, went wide-eyed from surprise.

"Hah!"

Shaver kicked Hokuto's chin from below.

Crash. Hokuto's head flew up at the same time as an intense crashing sound rang out. Then, Shaver hacked horizontally at Hokuto's chin as it experienced 'lag' from that impact.

"Hokuto!?" Natsume screamed.

Fortunately, Hokuto dodged the killing blow at the last second by twisting its body. Though this led to even more intense lag, it escaped Shaver's attack. The forced movement proved that Hokuto had already been pushed to its limits. That guy was so strong!

Shaver was also at a point where he was using all his strength and couldn't continue attacking. But though he hadn't gotten a finishing blow, Shaver's blade still easily cut apart Hokuto's scales. In other words, even Hokuto would have been in extreme danger if that strike had hit just now.

"Th, This bastard.....! What the hell is Kagami doing!?"

Shaver was completely out of control. But what was Kagami, as the shikigami's master, doing in this crucial moment. Even if he was an Independent Exorcist, he shouldn't just spectate in front of this kind of spiritual disaster crisis.

Moreover,

"N-Natsume-kun! Behind you!"

Kyouko screamed.

Because of Shaver's appearance, the hesitant nozuchi once again approached Harutora's group. The 'Type-Cyclops' that Hokuto had defeated once also moved again.

The courtyard was still filled with miasma and spiritual power. Even the ushi-oni that Shaver had slaughtered would revive again if it wasn't completely purified.

No, the situation was already getting worse.

A whirlwind suddenly whipped up on the roof of the branch, slowly becoming a fierce, rumbling, snakelike tornado that sprayed miasma in all directions. The monster that acted as the core of the tornado emerged inside it. It was a 'Type-Tornado'. The fourth mobile spiritual disaster had finally appeared.

"D-Damn. What the hell should we do.....!?"

Harutora cried out agitatedly, and Natsume gritted her teeth with an ashen face. Kyouko was frozen in place, her whole body trembling.

But the situation didn't only one-sidedly worsen.

"H-Harutora-sama! Look over there!"

Kon pointed to the bureau building.

Then,

"You students over there, hurry up and leave!"

After that warning, several shikigami appeared between Harutora's group and the ushi-oni.

Eight 'Emperors' in total formed a shield of defensive shikigami. The row of heavy-duty shikigami stopped the ushi-oni's advance.

At the same time, countless charms assaulted the ushi-oni's eyes. The charms swarmed like a flock of birds, forming rings in the air and simultaneously beginning to attack the spiritual disaster. This careful joint attack caused every single charm to

produce an effect several times stronger than normal. This was an effective strategy for when humans faced spiritual disasters. The ushi-oni retreated in a panic.

Black-clothed Onmyouji rushed out of the bureau building.

Spiritual disaster elimination teams.

"Teams eleven and twelve, wipe out the 'Type-Cyclops' over there! Next are the 'Type-Spider' and 'Type-Worm'. Cleanse the area afterwards! Team thirteen, have your members work together to lead the civilians to shelter! The fourteenth and fifteenth teams are responsible for the 'Type-Tornado' on the roof. We are responsible for the spiritual disasters in the courtyard!"

At the same time as the orders were given, the exorcists spread into formations in the courtyard. The chain of command had finally recovered - at least, it had already returned to a level where they could deal with the current situation. Upon careful inspection, the exorcists' equipment was incomplete and the team members were insufficient. But the exorcists had stood up bravely against the sudden crisis of a Phase Four.

The ushi-oni twisted and wailed in front of Harutora and the others. After an intense lag, it started to retreat in a panic. Harutora watched the escaping spiritual disaster in a daze. He inadvertently clenched a fist, clenching his teeth.

...Right.

We aren't alone. Right now, we're in the headquarters of spiritual disaster elimination, an Exorcist Bureau branch. Countless professional Onmyouji are standing in the same crisis as I am.

I can't give up.

"Natsume, let's use this opportunity to--"

"Yeah! Kurahashi-san, we're going!"

Taking advantage of the fact that the exorcists were holding back the spiritual disaster, Harutora and his companions ran towards the bureau building.

But, it wasn't just the spiritual disaster that was tough to deal with.

"Where do you think you're going!? Come play!"

Shaver.

The crazed shikigami held his katana and blocked Harutora's path. Though Hokuto immediately attacked Shaver from behind, he calmly twisted his body to avoid it. Then, he swiftly used the force of his spin to smash the dragon's body. Hokuto's body stiffened.

The dragon's giant body was actually a weakness. The agile Shaver had Hokuto dancing in the palm of his hand.

"This dragon moves too slowly! The master's teachings aren't enough. Let me teach you - come, play some more!"

Shaver showed his teeth, smiling exaggeratedly with wide eyes. "Bastard." Harutora took out charms.

"Natsume! Let's stop this crazy shikigami's actions!"

"Okay! Kurahashi-san, use Unmoving Golden Chains!"

"Y-Yes!"

Harutora first let Kon advance and use foxfire from outside his katana's attack range to check him, blocking Shaver's vision. Then was Harutora's water, fire, and wood-element charms. He used them disorderly one after another without any regard to Five Element Mutual Generation.

"Haha!" Shaver happily danced with his blade, cutting apart Harutora's disorderly thrown charms with slashes invisible to the eye.

But, in that period of time, Natsume and Kyouko started a chant. They formed Dharmacakra seals and then magic binding seals.

"With the mortal world under my control, I subdue this evil spirit in the name of Acala's oath! On bishibishi karakara shibari sowaka!"

The chant and magical energy of the two of them overlapped. The Unmoving Golden Chains binding technique. Natsume's magic was cut down by the spiritual pressure of Shaver's dancing katana. But Kyouko's magic binding, which shot out at the same time, restrained Shaver's body.

In the instant all of them thought the magic had succeeded.

"Hah? What is this? Do you think I'm an idiot!?"

Shaver, restrained by the magic, broke apart the invisible net using brute force.

The magic recoiled and Kyouko moaned. "Damn." Harutora gritted his teeth.

But the Golden Chains magic of the two of them hadn't been meaningless. Hokuto, who recovered from its lag, didn't pass up that opportunity, sweeping at Shaver with its tough tail. Even Shaver was sent flying like a doll upon receiving the dragon's full power strike. Shaver's body crashed into a pillar in the corridor, breaking the pillar into pieces and becoming buried in the rubble caused by the collapse of the corridor.

"Now."

Harutora grabbed the unsteady Kyouko's hands, escaping into the bureau building together with Natsume and Kon.

There wasn't a single person in the bureau building. It looked like everyone had already taken shelter outside the branch. Harutora's group ran towards the exit. There was a set of stairs leading to the second floor in front of them. They could reach the other side of the bureau building if they went around it.

But,

"Ahahahaha! Well done!"

The wall facing the courtyard was easily cut open and a beaming Shaver jumped into the corridor.

With his messy hair, Shaver looked like a dirty vagrant. But aura constantly poured from his body, and the internal pressure of it could almost send someone flying. Just by being next to him - No, even if Harutora's group was some distance away from him, they could hear a low bursting sound. Their bodies trembled uncontrollably. It was as if they were in a nightmare.

This wasn't a human. Harutora thought this again.

This was just a powerful thing with the external appearance of a human.

Shaver roughly wiped his mouth with his sword arm. Still smiling, he slowly approached Harutora's group with a pace that could turn into a charge at any time.

...Is it over!?

His brain was only thinking of escaping the branch as soon as possible. Summoning Hokuto into the bureau building would make it hard for it to move. Though he reflexively grabbed charms, his brain was almost white.

But,

"...O-Order!"

A weak but courage-filled voice sounded out. Shaver reflexively looked towards the wood-element charm that shot at him from behind.

The vines summoned by the charm were blown away by the sword's spiritual pressure before even touching the blade. But, the magic was just a feint to grab the shikigami's attention. A figure attacked Shaver, who had turned around with his sword drawn, from the stairs leading to the second floor.

Shaver's reaction was just a moment too slow. A vicious aura - the tip of a shakujou wrapped in demonic aura - hit the shikigami's body. The rings that had become fangs pierced into Shaver's body.

Success.

Tenma, who had pincered Shaver in the middle and released a wood-element charm from the other end of the corridor, called out.

After that, it had been a living spirit wearing flashing armor resembling a samurai who had attacked Shaver with Harutora's shakujou - Touji.

"T-Touji! Tenma!?"

Touji didn't pay attention to Harutora's exclamation, tightly gripping the shakujou that had pierced into Shaver's body and infusing it with as much magical energy as he could.

"AAHHHH!"

The rings bit deeper and deeper, turning his demonic aura into fangs. Lag appeared on Shaver's body for the first time, and his image seemed to start to distort out of interference.

But.

"You! You finally came!"

A joyous expression showed on Shaver's handsome face.

Though the rings were still embedded in his body, he grabbed on to the shakujou indifferently with his left hand. Then, he slowly pushed Touji away with one hand.

Touji's arm strength was already several times, even ten times, stronger than normal after transforming into his living spirit state. But Shaver's strength still surpassed him.

"This is still too boring! Hurry up and die!"

Shaver smiled as he swung his right arm that clutched the katana. "Touji!" Harutora shouted and Natsume and Kyouko held their breath.

But, Touji was extremely calm.

Harutora's shakujou was a magical tool that could control magical energy on its own. The spear with the rings as a point turned into a sword where half of the rod was its blade. Touji focused magical energy on the place Shaver grabbed on to, piercing into Shaver's fingers and leaping backwards in a flash. "Don't run!" Shaver grinned as he chased after the retreating Touji.

"Crush him!"

On the other side of the stairs, from the corridor leading outside, came a rushing torrent of white, which went around Touji's body and crashed into Shaver head-on. He was instantly engulfed.

The torrent - was a group of white shikigami. Fine paper shikigami that could become various wild beasts.

"Don't look down on me, you little shikigami!"

"Suzuka!"

It was Suzuka, who had been at class outside the branch for the whole day. He had said she would show up after school let out, and in the end she had made it right on time to this crisis. It seemed that she had met up with Touji and Tenma before, judging by how she coordinated with the two of them.

And like that, the six of them gathered together.

"You came right on time! Thanks, everyone!"

Harutora couldn't help but cheer loudly. But the three who had joined up with them didn't have a bit of happiness on their faces at all.

"What are you getting happy about, idiot!"

"Don't get careless, this guy is--"

A blade flashed silver. The shikigami burying Shaver were cut into pieces. The blade continued. Left, right - all of the shikigami in three hundred sixty degrees around Shaver were turned to wreckage by Shaver's slashes. With his long hair flying around, Shaver danced with a smile as he stood in the pile of shikigami remains.

"Uhahahaha....."

His emotions exploding, Shaver danced with his katana and leaped up along with his surging instincts, turning a somersault in the air. This was just a movement out of emotion, but an overwhelming wave of aura rushed towards Harutora.

"Well done! Great. It's no use anymore! You're all - all mine!"

That voice seemed like a boy's cheer as he snatched up all the toys he wanted to play with in a flash.

Shaver crouched on the ground and leaped up.

His body hit the wall like a bullet and bounced back like a spring--

His target was Touji.

"Ugh!"

The shield he created by instantly infusing magical energy into the shakujou was cut in two by Shaver's blade. Touji, who noticed that things were bad, jumped backwards and just barely dodged the strike. But when the leaping Touji hit the ground, Shaver's second strike came flying in.

Suzuka instantly gathered her remaining shikigami to attack Shaver, and Harutora and Natsume also used charms to assist. But Shaver didn't even pay attention to the attacks from behind. His eyes, which had changed color, stared intently at Touji.

"Tch!"

Touji clicked his tongue, turning his defense into offence. He used the shakujou's length, stabbing, parrying, and slashing.

But all of the attacks were ineffective. Shaver hummed a song while easily dealing with Touji's desperate counterattacks. There was too much of a disparity, whether in arm strength or speed. In addition, a scar was carved onto the shakujou every time Shaver blocked an attack.

"No good! We can't fight with this guy up close. Surround him from a distance and attack him with magic!"

Suzuka roared and shouted "Order!", throwing out a charm.

It was an original fire-element charm. The fireball that swelled up rapidly shrank, becoming an arrow that gave off a pale blue light and flew at Shaver. Shaver instantly noticed the danger, cutting the arrow apart before it reached him. But in that instant, the arrow of light suddenly split into many, tracing out sharp orbits as they turned to pierce Shaver's body from all directions.

Shaver shook violently. Taking that opportunity, Touji moved back next to Suzuka. But though his body received lag, Shaver didn't seem to have taken any damage. Instead, he smiled and stared at Touji and Suzuka.

"Hehe, that was fun just now. Is there more? Hey, do it again!"

His lag over, Shaver laughed loudly once again.

...This monster.....!

He had an overwhelming spiritual pressure even when he was wounded. If Touji hadn't been half-oni, even getting that close would have been difficult. Moreover, Shaver clearly wasn't using his full power. Harutora inadvertently trembled.

"...Alright!"

Released from his lag and returned to normal, Shaver turned his shoulders, abruptly striding forward. Touji and Suzuka grimly took stances. Harutora took out charms and prepared to support them, his mind beginning to think about strategy.

Just then,

".....Go."

Natsume said quietly. Eh? When Harutora turned his head in surprise, a golden blast raged in from the hole Shaver had cut open in the outer wall.

Hokuto. Natsume had deliberately had the dragon enter the cramped indoor space.

Harutora, Kyouko, and Tenma all lost their balance because of the wind pressure as Hokuto assaulted Shaver in the blink of an eye. As Shaver was currently confronting Touji and Suzuka, the direction of the attack came from his most unguarded rear, not the left or right like Harutora and the others. When Shaver turned around, Hokuto had already opened its wide mouth.

This was a danger-filled gamble. A surprise attack that Natsume was pulling out all the stops for. Right now, there wasn't even room for a counterattack. Shaver's eyes widened - he showed a heroic smile and extended his left arm in front of him to block.

Snap!

Hokuto bit into Shaver's left arm. Then, it tightly closed its jaw and twisted its head, trying to rip apart Shaver's left arm. Intense lag appeared all over Shaver's body to the point where he became unrecognizable as he lost his footing.

Then,

"Hah!"

Shaver moved his body violently.

Pressing his feet firmly against the ground, he forcefully made his body fall forward. Hokuto's head was in front of him after biting off his left arm. His body deftly turned to the dragon's side.

He tensed his right arm, gripping the katana with his arm. The blade stabbed forward - though Hokuto noticed his intent and hastily twisted its body to dodge, it was already too late. Shaver's shoulder hit Hokuto's neck - the position between its head and foreleg.

Thunk. The blade split open the golden scales.

Shaver continued using his whole body to push the blade into the dragon's body, deeper and deeper, burying the blade in the giant dragon's body. Though Hokuto struggled, Shaver still didn't let up. He braced himself on the ground, his hand pushing against the giant dragon and charged towards the wall. The blade penetrating the dragon's body nailed the giant dragon to the wall.

Harutora and his companions were speechless.

"......Hah. ......Haha. Dragon. Hah..... this is, a dragon....."

Shaver murmured ecstatically while suffering from intense lag. The lag now coursing over Hokuto's body was much more powerful than Shaver's.

"......Hehe..... This blade is called 'Higekiri'..... How is it? Incredible, right?"

Even Shaver couldn't endure the damage of his left arm being bitten off. A pained look showed on his handsome face.

But even so, Shaver still seemed incomparably excited.

His messy hair was scattered over his handsome face. Shaver leaned against the hilt of the katana piercing into the dragon's body - Higekiri - and forcefully stabbed it in again.

Hokuto spat out his shredded left arm, tightly clenching its teeth and staring at Shaver. Even if it wanted to turn toward him, it couldn't move because of the blade penetrating it. Even if it swept at Shaver's shoulder with its tail, Shaver didn't budge because Hokuto couldn't use power.

Hokuto could only roar angrily.

Shaver laughed happily.

Just then--

Hokuto's figure suddenly vanished. Natsume released Hokuto's materialization. Shaver lost his balance, collided into the wall, and sat on the ground. His expression was as if his soul had left his body.

On the other hand,

"N-Natsume.....!"

Natsume had collapsed to the ground on one knee.

Her face had completely lost its color. The shikigami and master had a connection similar to sharing of the senses. Though the connection between Natsume and Hokuto was extremely weak, there was still recoil. Moreover, Hokuto had never been harmed before. Ashiya Doman had only sealed Hokuto, but Shaver had 'driven it off'.

Harutora held her shoulders and asked: "Are you alright?"

Natsume didn't reply immediately. Her forehead was covered in sweat.

Just then,

"......Hey."

Shaver slowly stood up.

"......What are you doing? Why... is the dragon gone."

Shaver slowly turned to face Natsume.

The smile that had been on his face the whole time had completely vanished. Natsume couldn't control her shaking as Harutora held her. Harutora also felt a chill and supported Natsume up to a standing position.

"Bring it out."

Shaver showed a mask-like expression as he spoke.

"Bring it out - the dragon! Bring the dragon out!"

Shaver roared and took a step towards Natsume.

But before his foot touched the ground, Touji struck Shaver a blow from behind with the shakujou. Shaver, who had lost his left arm, couldn't keep his body's balance. Touji's blow made Shaver's body sway.

"This is bad! Hurry, escape!"

Right after Touji spoke up, Shaver turned and kicked him flying. But Shaver's gaze still stared intently at Natsume. He had completely locked his sights onto Natsume. The originally unstable shikigami had now completely lost his self-control.

"Ugh!? ...Order!"

Randomly scattering the protective charms in his hands, Harutora grabbed Natsume's hand and turned to run. Kon immediately followed, but...

"Kyouko!? What are you doing!"

Kyouko had gone completely petrified from fright and her legs couldn't move.

It was inevitable. After seeing such shocking developments, even Harutora's mind would become immediately paralyzed if he ever let up for just a moment.

In that brief time, Harutora already heard the sound of Suzuka chanting an incantation to stop Shaver. It wasn't just Suzuka. Tenma and Touji were all chanting.

"Kyouko!"

Kyouko finally came to her senses after hearing Harutora's shout. But being around him was the most dangerous place as long as Shaver was still going after Natsume.

In that case,

...Right!

"Everyone, run! I'll act as the bait. Meet up with Touji and the others after this guy leaves. Got it?"

Shaver was completely insane. But this was also a good opportunity.

The enemy had already lost his calm, something they could take advantage of. Just now, Touji who hadn't hit the enemy before had struck Shaver.

Even if his attacks were harsh, if they got through it maybe there would be an opportunity to turn the tables. If he didn't think that way, Harutora himself would be overtaken by terror.

"H-Harutora..... I, I....."

Kyouko's weak voice pained Harutora's chest. But Harutora still pushed himself on.

"Hurry up!"

After shouting that, he sprinted through the corridor after Natsume.

Not long afterwards, Shaver started moving, paying no heed at all to Suzuka's group who tried with their full power to stop his advance. Harutora didn't need to turn around to realize the strong aura blazing behind him. Or perhaps it was more suitable to call it miasma.

"Kon!"

Harutora issued an order to his shikigami and he also turned around to throw protective charms. His intense use of magical energy had caused him to slowly become exhausted. But Shaver easily broke through the magical walls and foxfire that filled the corridor.

But,

".....Order!"

It was Natsume. Pale-faced, she had recovered from Hokuto's impact and used charms from right behind Harutora. "Natsume!" After hearing Harutora's loud call, she nodded vigorously, breaking into a run again. Shaver continued pursuing, but just then Suzuka's shikigami assaulted him from behind and caught his leg. Touji followed right behind, and then Suzuka as well.

The baiting strategy he had thought of had been unexpectedly effective right off the bat. Shaver no longer cared about what was behind him, and he had directly taken all of Suzuka and Touji's attacks.

But, even if he endured the attacks of the two of them, he still showed no signs of being wounded. The only lag he had suffered was from the damage Hokuto had done to his left arm. "Monster." Harutora clenched his teeth again. But, the brief opportunities had stacked up bit by bit like piling sand, and they had already pulled away from Shaver. The two of them kept sprinting through the corridor.

Just then,

"H-Harutora-sama! It will be a dead end if we keep going!"

Kon's warning made Harutora momentarily panic.

"N, No. The training room is in front of it, and there's an exit on the other side!"

Moreover, there was a barrier set up in that training room used to practice first-class magic. If they escaped into the strong barrier, they could at least buy a bit of time.

Natsume probably understood her childhood friend's intentions and turned around to throw five charms.

"...Ban, un, taraku, kiriku, aku!"

A pentagram appeared in the corridor. Just as Shaver broke through the magical wall, Harutora, Natsume and Kon rushed into the training room.

Harutora immediately closed the door once they entered the room, using the shimenawa to activate the barrier. Then, he turned back to look at Natsume:

"Natsume! Quickly, continue strengthening this barrier--"

Harutora's voice broke off.

Natsume was staring wide-eyed into the room. Harutora also followed her gaze and became speechless.

There were many students.

They were huddled in the corner of the training room, their bodies shaking. After they saw Harutora and Natsume enter,

"H-Harutora?"

"Tsuchimikado-kun!"

Several people shouted out in surprise. They were classmates. It seemed that they had stayed in the branch building when the spiritual disasters had occurred.

Come to think of it, the students had also been forced to shelter in the underground magic practice field during the attack last month. So the students who didn't have time to escape this time had also escaped to hide in the training room where there was a barrier.

"What the hell is going on!? How is it outside?"

"Are the spiritual disasters still not purified? What are the exorcists doing!?"

His classmates shot questions at him. The other students also stared daggers at Harutora and Natsume. The situation was incredibly tense, and was soon going to become chaos. Harutora and Natsume stared, standing frozen in place.

".....How did this happen."

After he moaned, he could feel an aura approaching the closed door across the barrier.

"Dodge it!"

He gave Kon an order as he simultaneously pushed Natsume away from the door. A blade stabbed through the door a split second later.

The blade cut apart the shimenawa hung over the door. Sparks scattered with pops and more strength was put into the blade penetrating the door. Afterwards, it swiftly cut from left to right without being drawn back.

The fearsome slash didn't just cut the door. It even cut the wall as well as the wall facing the courtyard.

Aura and miasma immediately poured in with the rising dust. The students who had been slow to flee let out shrill screams.

Shaver appeared on the other side of the door and wall which no longer resembled their original form.

The smile had already vanished from his pretty face, where anger and impatience had also appeared in addition to the pain from losing his arm. His expression was filled with insanity, and his messy hair made him look like a fearful ghost.

"......The dragon?"

Shaver constantly repeated. Harutora hurriedly put Natsume behind him.

He might endanger the other students and classmates if he resisted now. But he wouldn't be able to find an opportunity to escape if he didn't fight back. No, whether he could fight back in this space was probably a good question on its own.

...What should I do!

Just as Harutora was frozen in place.

"Hey! Are you still alright?"

He could see the courtyard outside the ruined wall. The miserable condition of the training room could also be seen from the other side. A group of exorcists noticed their circumstances from afar.

The exorcists of the thirteenth team.

They instantly understood the seriousness of the situation and were planning on hurrying over--

But Shaver swung 'Higekiri' behind him without even looking back.

A huge slash flashed out as if to cleave the earth, raising dust and whipping up a violent aura between him and the exorcists. Just that swing had the power of a cannon, and hence it was visible that Shaver had truly been 'playing around' before.

The thirteenth team scattered in a panic upon receiving Shaver's strike and prepared to counterattack. But they suddenly stopped their magic incantations after noticing the students' circumstances. If they attacked from the courtyard where they were, they would endanger the students.

".....Not good!"

Harutora clicked his tongue, but right then, his companions' aid arrived from the side.

"Order!"

Along with Suzuka's shout, fire-element charms - an arrow of light like before - flew from the depths of the corridor, three at once. They split while flying, becoming many arrows of light that all pierced into Shaver. Lag occurred on Shaver's body.

But Shaver didn't even turn his head. Rather, he wanted to make havoc to his content before the exorcists came to make trouble. He slowly strode forth and entered the training field.

".....That dragon is your shikigami, right?"

He asked Natsume wildly.

No--

".....Since it's your shikigami, it should appear when you're on the verge of death, right?"

It wasn't a question, he wasn't confirming at all. He was talking to himself, making that decision on his own.

His body shook.

"Harutora-sama!"

Kon gave a warning. But Harutora still defended Natsume, not moving a step. He could feel that Natsume behind him realized that this was life and death and had started preparing magic. She formed hand seals and chanted incantations. Then he had to guard her with his body until her magic was complete.

Shaver moved. Harutora also swung his arm, throwing charms consecutively, but the developing charm magic weakened and vanished upon encountering Shaver's aura. Harutora didn't give up and threw one, two, and three, almost in the span of a breath.

...See it clearly! See it clearly!

He had seen through Shaver's actions beforehand from the motion of his aura. Then, in order to stop his actions as much as possible, he had to constantly carry out well-adjusted attacks. His left eye hurt a lot as it gazed at the enemy and his brain was in pain, but even so Harutora still continued to use his charm magic.

Shaver's expression tightened as if he felt it annoying, exposing a ferocious expression, and charged forward in a flash. He forcefully swung down 'Higekiri' towards the person obstructing him with a movement as if driving away flies.

"Harutora!"

Touji arrived from the corridor.

He threw the shakujou in his hand through the crumbled wall. It wasn't towards Shaver, but instead towards Harutora. Harutora rapidly caught the shakujou, infusing it with all his body's magical energy.

His brain felt like it was burning, but he still focused his mind and controlled his magical energy. He couldn't give up. Natsume was right behind him.

Shaver swung down 'Higekiri'.

Harutora deftly raised the shakujou - focus. 'See' the strength and technique of the blade and defend against the attack.

But,

...Ah.

Shaver's blade cut through Harutora's magical energy and his shakujou.

The swiftly-slashing blade slowly approached Harutora's face.

Kon crashed into Harutora from the side just in time, without the leisure to control the power of her full-force collision. 'Higekiri's blade swept by Harutora, cutting off a large amount of the fur from Kon's tail and cutting open the place where Harutora just been. Harutora and Kon tumbled across the training room floor in a ball and crashed into a bench. "Ah!" He groaned and hastily raised his head.

"Natsume!"

The pressure of the slash had hit Natsume, who had been behind him, directly after Harutora had unintendedly avoided it. Natsume's uniform rustled and her black hair flapped like a banner.

He was struck with terror for a moment.

But Shaver's slash hadn't been the same slash as when he had cut open the wall before.

Shaver hmphed.

"......If it still won't come out, you must have to summon it yourself, right?"

He murmured ominous words.

...Bastard!

Harutora stood up, reaching out to feel his remaining charms.

But just then, Natsume's magic finished.

"Suzaku! Genbu! Byako! Koujin! Nanto! Hokuto! Sandai! Gyokujo! Seiryuu!"

She drew the kuji-kiri.

This was one of the most fundamental basics of General Onmyoudou. Like the pentagram, even the basic was an essential magic. Natsume used the kuji magic that complied with the Onmyoudou system standards, rather than shugendo. A grid of five horizontal and four vertical trails of light emerged and emitted a dazzling white radiance.

The light burned Shaver's eyes.

"...!"

Making the shikigami feel fear. Of course, just this much wasn't enough to defeat him. But it was enough for them to escape.

At least, they thought their escape would succeed.

But that kind of thinking was too naive.

"Ah! That sucks!"

Shaver shouted, swinging his blade randomly as if he were a child throwing a tantrum. But sharp magical energy was interweaved closely with every swing of 'Higekiri'. The ceiling, floor, and walls were scored mark after mark. The magical energy flying in all directions made the training room become increasingly tense.

One of the slashes headed for the students who were frozen in a corner of the room.

Harutora grasped, but wouldn't make it no matter how he struggled. Natsume moved, swiftly throwing out a charm and putting up a magical wall. Rather than acting as a shield, it collided directly into the blade, diverting the slash's path.

After a tense moment, a relieved expression flashed across Natsume's face. But that action had sacrificed her valuable time to escape.

"Found you!"

When he noticed, Shaver's originally blinded eyes stared daggers at Natsume. Natsume retreated, her face remorseful. Fortunately, she hadn't gotten cut in that moment. But Shaver unconcernedly swung 'Higekiri' again.

An empty swing.

But the blade's strength whipped up a whirlwind.

A sharp magic whirlwind that couldn't be avoided engulfed Natsume's body.

It was that easy.

Only Harutora's cry resounded through the room.

Part 3

Kyouko was already past her limits.

Someone had died in front of her. Of course, she knew that there had already been several people related to the Twin-Horned Syndicate who had gotten killed, but that was just secondhand knowledge. During the spiritual disaster attack two years ago, the culprit, Suzuka's father, had died and caused many casualties among the public. He had heard that during the spiritual disaster last spring, the man recognized as the main suspect had ended up killing himself. Maybe there would also be people dying in this sweep of the Twin-Horned Syndicate.

But.

Someone she had been talking with not long ago, whose face and name were very familiar, had been cut to death in front of her.

She couldn't calm down.

Moreover, the spiritual disaster right afterwards rivaled the spiritual disaster attack of this spring. Of course, the spiritual disaster this time harmed a limited area, and they probably couldn't be compared with a 'Type-Chimera' that had terrorized all of Tokyo, but how would someone involved view this incident? Kyouko had been incredibly scared during the practical skills exam and in the shrine outer garden, but she had kept enduring as much as she could and working hard.

How could she keep calm in front of spiritual disasters?

Moreover, there were no adults around this time. Harutora and Natsume were very reliable, but that wasn't the issue. The pressure that 'she had to do something' was of a completely different type.

Even so, Kyouko had maintained her consciousness to the best of her ability when they had suffered through Ashiya Doman's attack before and had fought together

with Harutora and Natsume, constantly escaping a spiritual disaster. She didn't want to lose and couldn't bear failure, succeeding in urging herself to fight.

But--

She couldn't face Shaver.

When Kagami's shikigami had sacrificed his left arm to impale Hokuto, he had performed the killing strike with mirth and enjoyment.

Kyouko's heart collapsed again.

It was already enough.

She didn't want to go on.

"Kyouko!"

Kyouko finally came to her senses upon hearing Harutora's shout, but she was already in no condition to fight and had even lost the energy to support herself. She appreciated Harutora's sympathy upon seeing her miserable appearance, felt shameful, and wanted to cry loudly, but she still couldn't muster any courage. She was helpless and had already lost.

Then, Harutora and Natsume used themselves as bait and began to lure the out-of-control Shaver.

The fearsome shikigami chased the two of them and slowly drew distant from her.

She was relieved.

That feeling of relief shocked her. She almost smiled.

She was stunned at herself.

"Damn!"

The horned and fanged Touji cursed, chasing Shaver with all his might. Suzuka also followed right behind him, continuously unleashing magic with all her power. She thought of Harutora's instructions, to meet up with Touji - meet up? To do what? They still had to fight?

"Kurahashi-san!"

Her body trembled upon hearing someone talk to her. She turned around. With a stern expression, Tenma was looking at Kyouko as she sat on the ground.

"Are you alright? Were you hurt?"

Kyouko slowly shook her head after hearing him solemnly confirm. Tenma heaved a sigh of relief, and then firmly grabbed Kyouko's arm, saying:

"Let's go!"

At first she thought he was joking.

But Tenma was serious.

Bluntly put, Tenma was much weaker than her. He couldn't defeat her in a magic battle. Actually, he had been completely useless in the fight against Shaver except for his feint at the very start. If he had received Shaver's counterattack, he would undoubtedly be unable to defend, not even slightly like the others. A mere shockwave would seriously injure him.

But.....

Tenma still said 'let's go'. Those words didn't have a shred of hesitation. He truly wanted to rush to the frontline to help his companions.

Why was she different?

Kyouko had already lost her decision-making ability and didn't even know what she wanted to do. She stood up with Tenma's support and then numbly replied,

"Let's go."

Tenma nodded, chasing after Touji and Suzuka. Kyouko also started running, following behind him.

Probably because she had been paralyzed once, it hurt all over her body to move again. She was exhausted and felt like she would collapse immediately. But for now, Kyouko still continued to run. What could she do in this kind of situation, what would she face after catching up? She couldn't answer these questions and could only clearly see the giant aura in front of her as she ran and ran with all her strength.

She reached the training room.

Suzuka, Touji, and Tenma were standing in the corridor in front of the training room, surveying the situation inside through the crumbled wall.

Shaver was inside, Natsume was inside, and Harutora and Kon were also inside. In addition, there were other students - even classmates. They seemed to have come here to take shelter.

Right as Kyouko confirmed the situation inside the room, Shaver's blade emitted a whirlwind of magical energy that engulfed Natsume's body.

Harutora's cry resounded through the room.

"Natsume!"

Touji and Kyouko were frozen in place and Tenma was dumbstruck. "No way." Kyouko's heart quickly denied the scene before her.

It wasn't funny at all. Natsume couldn't be defeated this easily. He was the next heir of the Tsuchimikado family, the proud genius of the Onmyou Academy, and the

hero that Kyouko had always yearned for and whom she had been saved by several times.

But, the image of Eto collapsed in a pool of blood flashed through Kyouko's mind again.

The blood drained from her body.

However--

Natsume still lived.

But she wasn't unhurt. The whirlwind of magical energy had torn the uniform on her body to rags.

Then,

"Aah!"

Natsume, appearing from the whirlwind, collapsed to the ground.

There was no blood on her shredded uniform. White, smooth skin - in stark contrast to the black-colored fabric for males - could be glimpsed inside the uniform.



Kyouko's mind went blank.

"......Eh?"

In that moment, the training room that had long since become hell was shrouded in silence.

The students, especially their classmates, were speechless.

The collapsed, red-faced Natsume covered her chest with the pieces of her uniform, but it was meaningless resistance. The soft curves hidden inside the uniform modeled after Heian imperial clothing were now clearly visible.

The ribbon that tied her hair had already fallen as well, and her black hair hung down over her chest from her exposed shoulders. Natsume's expression was filled with embarrassment, but even that expression was charmingly cute.

Her appearance could no longer be described with words, but it definitely couldn't be a male body.

As expected.

The heavy suspicions she had recently been hiding in her heart.

They instantly buried Kyouko.

Kyouko smiled sadly, as if she were smiling and crying. It was a confused, twisted, and unhidden expression.

So that was it. Kyouko understood.

Tsuchimikado Natsume--

Kyouko's hero--

Was a girl.

Part 4

"Natsume!"

His shout almost broke his voice.

Harutora hurried over as fast as he could, simultaneously 'seeing' the whirlwind that had absorbed Natsume. The pain in his eyes and the splitting pain in his head didn't matter. It didn't matter even if the pain ended up reaching his heart.

--Natsume!

He single-mindedly watched for Natsume.

Natsume still lived.

The blade of magical energy hadn't harmed Natsume's body for some reason and had only cut apart her clothes.

Then, Natsume was tossed out of the whirlwind and tumbled to the ground with a cry. The students all gasped upon seeing her unclothed appearance.

...Damn!

They had been found out.

Natsume's true identity had been exposed, and it had been right in front of their classmates.

Moreover, he only noticed now that the magic that Natsume used when she posed as a male had also disappeared. Natsume used yang aura to mask her female yin aura when she posed and dressed as a male. She multiplied the yin aura of Hokuto with her own yin aura, making it as if she carried yang aura.

But right now, Hokuto had been severely injured, and the yin aura coming from the shikigami had become weak. Natsume's aura returned to its normal yin aura and she could no longer hide it.

"Ah!"

The red-faced Natsume pulled her shredded uniform to her chest. Her slender, bare arms trembled lightly. Harutora flew into a rage upon seeing his childhood friend's tearful expression.

On the other hand, Shaver gazed at Natsume and smirked.

"What's going on, there isn't even a vessel? That's so annoying....."

Shaver's intent could be understood from those words. He hadn't killed Natsume instantly, fearing that the shikigami might not appear again after the master died. So he had torn Natsume's uniform to look for Hokuto's vessel.

"No helping it. Then I'll cut off an arm or leg. Please, before you die--"

"What the hell are you joking about!"

Harutora gripped the shakujou that had been cut into two pieces in his hands, striking Shaver as the blood rushed to his head.

He hit.

But that just showed how little heed Shaver paid to Harutora.

"Annoyance."

Shaver moved his leg like he were kicking a pebble, but it would definitely be deadly if he were kicked head-on. It was Touji who saved Harutora before that happened. He blocked the kick with crossed arms, making Shaver lose his balance instead.

"Oh." Just as Shaver stumbled, Touji picked up Harutora, grabbed Natsume, and shoved them back.

"Bakatora! Calm down!"

Touji roared at him.

"Shut up!"

But Harutora yelled back.

In that period of time, Kon covered Shaver's vision with foxfire and Suzuka attacked him with charms, but Shaver indifferently swung his katana, charging towards Harutora and the others.

Touji threw Harutora and Natsume out at the same time, swiftly leaping out himself as well and dodging the shikigami's slash. The wall behind him was cut open and a new hole was opened in the training room as it crumbled. Shaver turned his head amidst the dust that fell from the ceiling, searching for the thrown Harutora and Natsume with his gaze.

His gaze landed on them.

Shaver's face revealed a mocking smile as if he were teasing his prey.

A hard-to-endure anger filled Harutora's entire body with strength.

...This thing!

When he had been thrown, he had tossed away the shakujou in his hands to protect Natsume. Harutora kneeled on the ground, tightly grabbing all of the charms he had, and refined his aura into magical energy with all of the energy that burned in him.

A flashing pain coursed through his brain and even reached his fingertips.

Anger.

Regret.

No matter how many charms he had, they weren't even worth mentioning to the shikigami in front of him. Even if he bet his life on an attack, he couldn't hurt Shaver a bit.

He couldn't protect the people important to him.

Natsume leaned against Harutora from inside his arms.

His hunger exploded.

Not enough, not enough, not enough.

Aura, magical energy, spirit-seeing ability, strength, everything.

Suddenly, the same feeling from the mock battle appeared in Harutora's heart, from when he had been restrained by Eto's Unmoving Golden Chains. Just like that time, he had been restrained and shut in a 'shell'. The impatient feelings of wanting to struggle and break through that 'shell' poured from his heart.

He just wanted that 'shell' to be gone.

If only he could see more directly - if only he could touch.

...Wait.

Right now, he 'saw' the outside world from the 'shell' using the magic Natsume had cast as the medium. The pentagram marked underneath his left eye, the Tsuchimikado family seal modeled after the stars, the magic symbol of Onmyoudou.

This was the door connecting the inside of his shell to the outside world, and simultaneously a crack in the firm shell sealing himself that had been slightly cut open, leading to the start of his hatching. The moment he felt this, Harutora pulled his strength back into this crack.

Focus.

He focused his entire mind and body.

Then,

...Shatter...

The sound of something breaking resounded inside Harutora's body.

The horrifying sound made Harutora's hair stand on end, and the decisive sound of destruction evidenced some kind of irreversible change.

It was very likely that the thing destroyed was the existence named Tsuchimikado Harutora. Even so, that was fine. If he could protect Natsume that way, then who cared what happened afterwards.

So, the raven spread its wings.

# Chapter 5 - Darkness Emerge

## Part 1

The world he could see was filled with aura.

Harutora's stunned self was left where it was, while his soul flew to a distant place and slowly spread out. The feeling of gazing down upon his ant-like self was extremely inexplicable.

He could see many things. Tsuchimikado Harutora's aura, the aura of Tsuchimikado Natsume who leaned against him, and the aura of Kon, who was connected to Harutora. Ato Touji's demonic aura, not too far away. The various kinds of aura that his classmates carried. And the aura and miasma revolving through the room, the flow of magical energy that magic had left behind.

The savage shikigami in front of him, Shaver.

Shaver's aura was frighteningly strong. He gave off an overwhelming sense of presence compared to the surrounding aura. Harutora finally understood exactly what kind of enemy he had been fighting against.

Harutora's vision became even wider.

It even encompassed Suzuka who had come from the corridor to assist, along with Tenma and Kyouko next to her. The exorcists of the thirteenth team were hastily approaching from the courtyard and there were also other teams across from them. In addition, several mobile spiritual disasters surrounded the exorcists. At some point, Harutora was overlooking the entirety of the branch. Everyone's auras drew out an image like a mandala with Shaver and the spiritual disasters as the center. Harutora was fascinated.

Then, he suddenly noticed a certain 'movement'.

It was above. Harutora's attention moved to the sky far above his head. The boundless, vast space, the origin of the vast world that he was aware of.

Harutora saw them. Several huge 'existences' that were hidden in this vast world. No, they couldn't be expressed with the concepts 'huge'. Because they reached him from distant places, from everywhere, they were 'existences' that transcended 'space'. Even a single one was endless. Harutora knowledge and the knowledge of humankind couldn't understand such means of existence.

But, he understood that it was an 'existence' and he could feel that it 'moved'.

Harutora felt that this kind of feeling that he couldn't understand had nothing to do with him. It might be a pure mistake, or a feeling that could be called a near-death experience. Of course, it was also possible that the circumstances were different..... Anyway, Harutora couldn't understand it.

But--

Even if it was only for a moment, Harutora's wings indeed touched the sky.....

◎

Harutora came back to his senses when his face felt a blazing offensive aura.

...Just now.

What had happened?

He didn't understand. But there was a more urgent crisis before him before he started thinking back to it.

Shaver's face showed a mocking smile as if he were playing with his prey.

He stopped his body and lifted his blade, about to leap over.

The current Harutora couldn't block his overwhelming aura no matter how he struggles. At least, that was true if he fought him head-to-head, but.....

...Now.

Harutora confirmed the magic of the charms clutched in his hands. He didn't need to check with his eyes, as his spirit-seeing ability didn't rely on his sight to begin with. He felt it using his own aura, choosing the necessary magics and flowing his magical energy into those magics. This time wasn't an ordinary flow like the past. His flowing aura was instantly refined into a 'suitable form', instantly compressing and filling the charm.

"...Order!"

The water-element charm in his hand flew out like a beam of light. Rather than a torrential flood, it was more like a water cannon shot at an extraordinarily high pressure. His target was Shaver's left eye. The concentrated attack made Shaver unconsciously show a surprised expression, and he twisted his body to avoid it.

"Order!"

But, Harutora threw out a wood-charm again, which slid under the legs of Shaver as he twisted his body. Thin vines, yet tough as metal cord, constricted around Shaver's ankle that supported him as he landed on the ground. Shaver lost his balance, and:

"Order!"

A third charm flew out, a fire-element charm, but the charm magic had already been overwritten. The fireball that swelled in front of him compressed, becoming a

shining arrow of pale blue light. This was the original fire charm magic that he had learned from Suzuka.

Moreover, just then, the water bullet produced by the first charm altered its trajectory after it was dodged, hitting Shaver's leg.

The entwined vines absorbed the water aura of the water bullet, leaving his ankle and extending branches into the air.

The arrow of light pierced those branches.

The branches instantly ignited as they were simultaneously absorbed by the arrow of light. The wood-aura that had been strengthened after absorbing the water-aura was reabsorbed by the fire-aura, and the arrow of light gave off a blinding radiance. All of this happened in instants.

"...Tch!"

Shaver's blade hacked back and forth, blocking the arrow of light that was stabbing at him. But in that moment, the arrow of light split into countless beams of light, hitting Shaver like lasers.

"H-Harutora-kun!"

Natsume raised her head to look at Harutora in surprise from his arms. But Harutora didn't respond, continuing to watch Shaver as he suffered from lag. At the same time, he rapidly rose while carrying Natsume.

He put his remaining five charms back into his charm box and took off the jacket of his uniform to drape it over Natsume's shoulders. Natsume tightly held onto Harutora's hand.

This little trick couldn't defeat him, and Shaver's aura actually hadn't weakened at all.

But,

...It could work.

Harutora could currently 'see' everything clearly.

As if his anxiety before had been an illusion, as if the details of aura and magical energy were in front of him, he seemed to be able to freely manipulate the strength inside his body. He was probably broken for good. The nerves underneath his skin seemed as sensitive as if they were outside his body, and his strength seemed to overflow like blood after his artery had been cut.

Harutora didn't know what this feeling was.

But at least he could fight like this.

He could ferociously beat down that bastard.

"This is finally worth it!"

Shaver shouted out and slashed at him. Harutora threw out protective charms.

Harutora's magical walls were as weak as paper in front of the blade Shaver swung. So, he narrowed and compressed his strength, to become a shield rather than a wall. He continued to shrink it down to about the size of a fist, and then overlapped several along the path of 'Higekiri's blade. Shaver cut apart all of these defenses, but his momentum was greatly reduced. Harutora avoided the enemy's attack while carrying Natsume.

Shaver, whose slash had been avoided, swung his sword a second time as his face distorted. Harutora avoided it again. He dodged back and forth while carrying Natsume while keeping a close eye on Shaver's movements.

...Right.

Shaver and Hokuto were both shikigami. Their movements would become very simple without their master's instructions.

...I need more detailed 'observation'.

Harutora searched for Shaver's movements, Shaver's breathing, and Shaver's true nature. He couldn't be confused by his outer appearance. This thing wasn't a human, but rather a shikigami, a spiritual existence that could penetrate and cut apart everything. Its true nature was--

...A blade!

Harutora's eyes widened. The katana in Shaver's hands, 'Higekiri'. Come to think of it, although lag had appeared on his body several times, only Higekiri hadn't suffered from lag. It seemed like Shaver was a spiritual entity, but Higekiri was a physical entity.

That meant,

...That's his vessel!

Shaver was a spiritual entity that materialized using Higekiri as its core.

Then, what tactics should he use with this katana shikigami as his enemy?

"Kon!"

Harutora issued an order to his defensive shikigami.

Now, he could feel that his connection to Kon was closer than ever before. Harutora infused a large amount of magical energy into his defensive shikigami. The magical energy flooding from her master made Kon's blue eyes widen. Harutora's loyal shikigami perked up her ears and tail, her whole body shaking as she absorbed as much of the magical energy that came as she could.

"Go!"

"Yes!"

Kon released foxfire.

A heat wave swept through the room.

The spectacular, raging blue flame assaulted Shaver like a stampede. The shikigami's body was instantly scorched and it wailed loudly.

Shaver was a blade, and his aura was metal aura. Five Element Mutual Conquering, fire conquers metal. But Shaver swung Higekiri, scattering the foxfire on his body.

Though fire could beat him, their overall strengths were different. He needed a stronger power to conquer Shaver's aura.

...Fire aura..... fire aura! I could use my five charms to mutually generate five auras..... No, that wouldn't work. With my charm magic, it won't be powerful enough no matter what. Even with mutual generation, I need a stronger..... stronger..... stronger aura.....!

"That's enough, I'm gonna kill you two!"

Shaver took the initiative to attack. Harutora had already used up his protective charms and he couldn't dodge. But Harutora noticed a reliable demonic aura rushing towards them.

"...You're completely open."

The living spirit put his whole body's strength behind a fist to knock Shaver flying, and Suzuka's charm magic continued pursuing him, hitting the shikigami. Right as his attention moved, Touji struck again.

Shaver had originally been a tough opponent to face. But since his attention was completely focused towards Harutora and Natsume, he couldn't block Touji and Suzuka's combined attacks.

Then,

"Students, evacuate immediately!"

The exorcists rushed in from the collapsed outer wall. The personnel of the thirteenth team.

"Use your shikigami to surround the target, and begin purification after the students evacuate!"

The exorcists' shikigami appeared one after another around Shaver. Most were 'Emperors', but there were several 'Yaksha'. They used their numerical superiority to suppress Shaver's frenzy.

But Shaver didn't give up at this. His violent slashes cut the exorcists' defensive shikigami to death. As expected, although they had greatly weakened his strength, the exorcists still couldn't control Shaver.

Harutora gripped Natsume's hand, moving away from Shaver while thinking.

...Strong fire aura. Strong enough to be on even terms with Shaver.....

Harutora suddenly stopped moving.

His eyes widened and sweat dropped from his temple.

Could he do that kind of thing? It wasn't impossible. The conditions were met and his necessary cards were all here. All that was left was for Harutora to build it up and control it.....

"...Natsume."

Harutora grabbed Natsume's shoulders, looking straight at her. Natsume bit her lip hard upon seeing the determination that had emerged on Harutora's face.

"Lure that guy into the courtyard. I'm going to break that dull blade."

Shaver's target was Natsume, and he now held animosity towards Harutora - no, it was killing intent. The strategy where the two of them acted as bait should still be effective. When Shaver was lured to the courtyard, then..... he could only leave it up to fate.

Natsume looked back at Harutora's unmoving eyes.

Then,

"Okay."

She nodded her head.

Right afterwards,

"Ah! These guys are all coming to bother me!"

As Shaver exclaimed, the final 'Emperor' was cut down to the ground. "Let's go." Harutora gripped Natsume's hand, starting to run.

"Suzuka, move aside for me! Touji, throw me the shakujou!"

Touji, who had been surrounding Shaver along with the defensive shikigami, turned back to look with a "What?". On the other hand, Suzuka, who was in the corridor, also showed an expression of incomprehension, but still followed Harutora's instructions. She retreated back into the depths of the corridor along with Kyouko and Tenma next to her. Harutora and Natsume rushed out of the practice room, passing through the crumbled outer wall and arriving in the corridor. Kon followed right after the two of them.

The sun dyed the courtyard in golden colors.

The spiritual disaster purification teams were still purifying the spiritual disasters. The one-eyed mass of earth, the 'Type-Cyclops', had already been purified, and the ushi-oni that Shaver had crushed had also vanished. The 'Type-Tornado' that had appeared on the roof had almost been purified completely, but the surrounding miasma showed no signs of weakening, and there were still spiritual battles against spiritual disasters that were still in Phase Two, though they hadn't evolved to Phase Three.

Just then,

"Trying to run?"

Shaver charged out of the bureau building, chasing after Harutora and Natsume.

"Kon!"

"Yes!"

He poured magical energy into Kon again and she used foxfire to stop Shaver's pursuit, but the second time was unsuccessful. Shaver slashed horizontally, cutting apart the flame with a fearsome sword pressure. Damn! Just as Harutora clicked his tongue,

"Onbishibishi karakara shibari sowaka!"

Natsume unleashed the Unmoving Golden Chains magic the moment Shaver passed through the cut-apart flame. Though her hand seal was a quick product that hadn't been fully completed, Shaver's momentum - even though it was only for a moment - was weakened and he slowed down.

Behind him, Suzuka and the exorcists hurried over to assist. After Shaver went outside, the exorcists could use magic without fear. Several charms turned into a rain

of arrows and attacked Shaver. Shaver swung Higekiri above his head, trying to cut them down, but more than half of the attack still passed through Shaver's defenses and hit the shikigami.

"Harutora!"

Touji also rushed out from the bureau building right after Harutora. He clutched the shakujou Harutora had requested in his hands - the front end of the parts that Shaver had already cut it into.

"Catch!"

He raised it over his head and threw it out.

This was the second time today. Harutora reached out his arm - and caught it.

...In this case, just one more thing.....!

Harutora went over the state of the entire courtyard's aura again. It was there, right by him. He could do it.

But in that moment, Harutora's consciousness moved away from Shaver.

"Harutora-sama!"

When Harutora looked in the direction Kon shouted in, he noticed Shaver's aura violently swelling.

"AHH!"

Shaver, immersed in the rain of magic, swung Higekiri around chaotically. His slashes carved open the ground, approaching Harutora. Harutora swiftly pushed Natsume away while he dived in the other direction. Right afterwards, the slash cut through the space between the two of them.

Harutora swiftly tumbled on the ground and jumped up. But Harutora realized his crisis just as Natsume opened her eyes and rose after being pushed away by Harutora. Shaver instantly leaped over.

His target was - Natsume.

...I can't let you do that!

He had no time to think. Harutora reached his hand into his charm box, throwing out his last five charms one after another without leaving a single one. He checked the charms' magic after throwing them. There were two fire-element and one earth, metal, and wood-element charms. He used one fire-element charm to forcibly replace the earth-element charm, barely making up for the lack of a water-element charm using his own magical energy, and instantly chanted an incantation.

"God of the east sea, Amei! God of the west sea, Shukuryou! God of the south sea! Kyojou! God of the north sea, Gukyou! Gods of the four seas, fend off a hundred demons and drive back the fierce disaster! Order!"

This was the Imperial-style magic that Harutora had failed at once, one originally used to fend off the Hyakki Yagyou. Though it was a magic that stopped spiritual disasters from drawing near, it constructed a defensive wall aimed at the 'hostility' of spiritual entities, also known as a barrier, so it couldn't possibly have no effect against Shaver who was a spiritual entity.

The five charms spread into a pentagram in midair. Though the magic had started, the process was basically a rush job. Before the magic was completed, most of the magical energy ran amok and vanished.

But. Captain Eto had taught Harutora something. Barriers didn't have to be used in a fixed place. Harutora continued infusing all the magical energy in his body into

the pentagram, and when the magic was still a repulsive barrier, he gave up his control of the magic and let it naturally run amok with Shaver as its target.

The light of the pentagram became a spear instead of a shield to attack the airborne Shaver. After it crashed violently into the shikigami, it knocked him outwards. Shaver roared, flying over Natsume's head and falling to the ground. In that period of time, Natsume also rose.

But Natsume didn't look at Shaver behind her back after rising. Instead, she stared at Harutora. No, it wasn't just her, even Shaver had forgotten his anger and looked over.

Natsume's face went pale.

"Harutora-kun! Behind you!"

A stench instantly rose around Harutora.

A giant insectile monster covered with rotting moss, vines, and weeds, a 'Type-Worm'. One of the spiritual disasters that had chased Harutora and the others before Shaver appeared, the nozuchi, had escaped the exorcists' purification and still lived.

The nozuchi approached Harutora from behind, opening its giant mouth to swallow Harutora. Natsume let out a splitting scream, but Shaver relaxed, laughing scornfully instead.

But Harutora had long since noticed the nozuchi's approach.

His last card.

"...Kon, come!"

Harutora fearlessly raised his head to look at the Phase Three about to completely engulf him and spread his arms. Kon, receiving his summons, rushed into her master's arms like an arrow from a bow.

In the next moment, the spiritual disaster swallowed Harutora's body.

Then, the nozuchi who had swallowed Harutora burned in a blue flame all over its body.

The flame instantly incinerated the spiritual disaster and its intensity grew at an accelerating pace, becoming a giant pillar of flame. The heated air swirled into an eddy, sweeping through the courtyard. The surrounding miasma was blown away, becoming filled with flame instead - with the fire aura released by the pillar of flame.

Fire aura.

"Haah--!"

Harutora's shout resounded through the entire area from the pillar of flame.

Harutora's figure emerged from the center of the flame. His right hand grasped the shakujou and his left hand held Kon as she leaned against his body. Kon's eyes were wide as her master carried her and she constantly unleashed foxfire.

The magic that Ohtomo had placed on the shakujou was still complete after it had been cut in two. Harutora borrowed the shakujou's strength to put up a magical wall, blocking the violent flame. At the same time, he infused magical energy to his shikigami, using the foxfire to roast the nozuchi from within.

The nozuchi was a spiritual disaster formed of wood aura.

He let the wood aura generate and become fire aura. He used Five Element Mutual Generation on the phase three, and thus the blue pillar of flame that was born was a strong magical energy that no one could have imagined.

Harutora's gaze focused on Shaver. Shaver looked back at Harutora within the flames with a dull expression. His expression slowly warped and he slowly revealed

joy. 'Strength' that surpassed his expectations clearly fascinated him, and his eyes lit up.

He could only leave it up to fate now.

But he hadn't calculated the fire aura to be this strong. He had originally planned on controlling it using the shakujou's strength, but Harutora couldn't do it on his own. Moreover, Harutora didn't know any magic to control fire aura other than by using fire-element charms. If this went on, the giant flame he had created would dissipate. In addition, it might even go out of control.

...What should I do?

Harutora continued holding onto his barrier, feeding the force of the flame through Kon, and simultaneously pondering with his heart and soul.

...Control fire aura..... Fire charms.....?

He dug through his memories, searching for one clue after another. The magic he had seen until now and the incantations he had heard. He desperately recalled with all his power.

He had it.

How ironic. No, this was an obvious result.

Wasn't this what that shikigami's master, that man, was good at?

"Noumaku saraba tatagyateibyaku saraba bokkeibyaku sarabata tarata senda makarosyada ken gyakigyaki saraba biginnan untarata kanman!"

Vajrapani's most fundamental dharani.

Acala's Fire Realm magic.

Obtaining the magic's strength, Harutora felt himself link with the flame, becoming one with the fire aura as if he had also become a flame. The pillar of flame contracted in the blink of an eye.

...I've made you wait.

"Fire conquers metal! Order!"

Focusing the contracted fire aura, he threw the shakujou out in place of a charm. The Fire Realm magic that had been generated using a Phase Three as food ignited with the shakujou as a core, drawing straight towards Shaver in a raging wave. Shaver smiled, swinging Higekiri and slashing at the shakujou with a loud shout.

The aura and magical energy exploded.

The shockwave instantly blew away Natsume, Harutora, and Kon, sweeping the courtyard clear and shaking the bureau building after colliding with the outer wall.

A few spectacular seconds.

The air seethed as dust filled it. Harutora rose, enduring his pain.

He was completely 'empty'. This was the first time he had exhausted his aura to this degree. His body felt like he had to use all his power just to breathe. Harutora surveyed the surroundings.

Natsume, collapsed prone on the ground, moaned and moved. Kon also tried to turn around to look but only lightly moved her tail. The two of them were safe and sound.

And, Shaver..... had vanished.

No.

There was a katana stuck in the ground, Higekiri. Aura still lingered in the blade. But Shaver himself had vanished. He had probably been unable to maintain his materialization after taking huge damage, just like Hokuto.

Harutora kneeled on the ground, his energy spent, looked up to the sky and closed his eyes with a long sigh.

Though the nozuchi just now hadn't been purified yet, it had already been weakened a lot by the spiritual disaster purification teams. Shaver had suffered a serious injury because of Hokuto's fangs, and had been immersed in Suzuka, Touji, and the thirteenth team's focused magic barrage after he lost his awareness, constantly accumulating injury. Natsume and Kon had also helped Harutora with all their strength. This wasn't an outcome that he had brought with his own strength. It had only happened because of the aid of the people around him and because of constantly overlapping lucky breaks.

Even so--

"......We did it.....!"

Harutora, kneeling on the ground and facing the sky with his eyes tightly closed, let out a laugh filled with energy.

This was Harutora's moment of victory.

Afterwards--

Part 2

At the same time, the 'Ogre Eater' Kagami had broken into a cold sweat in an alley not far from the location of the bureau building.

".....It looks like it's already done over there."

He spoke to the one he was confronting.

"Yeah."

The man replied.

"Seems that way."

Then, he revealed an arrogant smile.

Needless to say, Kagami had realized long ago that Shaver had gone out of control. He already had a grasp of the general situation. He hadn't thought that the captain of the thirteenth team had that kind of thing hidden - that magical tool. But Shaver's transgressing actions had also been outside his calculations. But, the point that Kagami was the sorest about was that by the time he realized the situation, Shaver had already started going out of control and the spiritual disaster had already begun. He had been too late for everything. At the time, Kagami had clicked his tongue.

There was an element of force majeure in Shaver's action of destroying the magical tool and becoming the spark that incited the spiritual disaster chain reaction. But it was still an undeniable fact that the shikigami had escaped the master's control and gone out of control. In that moment, it was already decided that Kagami would be punished. Needless to say, considering Shaver's actions afterward - the conspicuous impediment he had brought to the spiritual disaster purification - it would definitely be a serious punishment. Naturally, Shaver would also be taken away from Kagami and sealed again after being designated a forbidden magical tool. How truly regretful, given the present situation.

So, when he learned that he was too late, Kagami decided to just let it go. He decided to simply let Shaver do what he wanted to and make a scene. Anyway, Shaver was going to be taken back and his actions would also be limited. Then might as well use this opportunity to perform a 'test'.

The subject was Tsuchimikado Natsume and people surrounding him.

Like Kagami had predicted, the out-of-control Shaver had searched for them on his own. He had originally wanted to confirm first-hand, but it seemed that this had value, considering Shaver's actions of oppositions. Unfortunately, the incident this time was a 'situation completely outside his predictions'. He couldn't anticipate being able to see how the people who held certain intents regarding them would react to this. Even so, he could still weigh what kind of level of skill they had reached.

So, Kagami escaped the scene, ignoring the occurrence of the spiritual disaster, and cast stealth magic on himself, overseeing the battle of Harutora's group.

In the end, they hadn't surpassed or fallen short of his expectations. The scene of the dragon still resisting after being stabbed by Higekiri made him sigh and appreciate that it really was the Tsuchimikado family guardian beast, but as a result it still ended up dematerializing. As for the rest - forgetting the 'Child Prodigy' for now - they certainly showed a stunning power for students, but that was it. At the most, they could be called 'more competent than he had imagined'.

Anyway, this would be meaningless if it went on.

He needed to make Ato Touji fall and become a spiritual disaster as fast as possible and check exactly what kind of thing the oni inside his body was. Moreover, in order to confirm whether Tsuchimikado Natsume was truly Yakou's reincarnation and whether he would 'awaken' like the Yakou fanatics spoke of, he had to force him

into a crisis of life and death. Kagami bided his time in order to let his shikigami 'test' those two points.

However, when the dragon dematerialized, Shaver had gone even more out of control.

It seemed that he had been invaded by the quite thick, peculiar miasma. He had already become delirious. Kagami clicked his tongue again, changing back to his already-once-changed original method of surveillance.

He planned on taking back control of the shikigami from the shadows, letting him continue to look out-of-control on the surface while Kagami was actually controlling him. If Kagami had realized that plan, the battle of Harutora's group just now would have ended up in a completely different outcome.

But, Kagami hadn't been able to realize his plans.

That was because Kagami wasn't the only one watching over Harutora's group's battle from the shadows.

"Hold on a bit. Why don't we both not fight here, okay?"

Starting now, it wasn't a question of whether Kagami acted on Harutora's group or not. Rather, it had become a serious battle of the kind he hadn't had for a long time. However, it wouldn't be a so-called magic battle. No, maybe it would count as a magic battle in some broad sense. It was a kind of strategic negotiation that came before first-class magic clashed directly - a spectacle of a second-class psychological battle.

After all, he couldn't even see the enemy. He had just received a warning of magic. In that moment, Kagami hadn't been able to notice his opponent's existence, and naturally he didn't know his opponent's true identity. Instead, it was the opponent who had a hold of Kagami's location, position, and even plans. To a practitioner, it

was practically a situation of having a blade pressed against the throat..... It wouldn't even be too much to call him hanging by a thread.

Moreover, the enemy's warning had even been intertwined with demonic aura. This was a true demonic aura from which he could feel a power that wasn't to be looked down upon.

Kagami thoroughly strengthened his defenses, carrying out inspections with all his power. He broke through countless disguises and stealth magics, following the trail of the one who had warned him.

He finally confronted the other party in this small alley.

Kagami couldn't know exactly how much time had passed. When he confronted the man in front of him, the density of the time was worlds different from usual.

The man was huge.

He was about as tall as Shaver, but his body was as athletic as a warrior, as if he had trained extensively. Short, golden hair. He had a chiseled face and eyes narrowed as thin as slits. Even though he wore a shirt, he wore no tie, and he gave off the impression of a wild beast - or perhaps it was actually the feeling of a true carnivore.

This wasn't a human.

He could already confirm after coming this close. This was a 'Type-Ogre'. No, its spiritual power had already been stable for a long time. A long-lived oni.

Moreover--

In contrast to his right sleeve, which was bulky enough to make one associate it with steely-bulging muscles, his left sleeve swayed gracefully, nothing at all visible inside it.

The oni in front of him had no left arm.

A one-armed and long-lived oni. There was only one oni fitting those conditions.

Excited, insuppressible trembling in anticipation of battle rose all over Kagami.

"......I never expected the reactions of the ones around them..... I didn't think someone big like you would be coming. Really, it's impossible to predict what will happen next....."

The man stretched his neck slightly and replied to Kagami's slightly quivering tone.

"I just came by chance because I happened to hear some words in a bar. I didn't think it would become this kind of situation..... Perhaps this is fate."

"Hey, hey..... If it was only 'chance' and 'fate', I won't be able to stand it. There was definitely some reason that interested you to make you take a special trip here. Moreover, it's almost certain what reason interested you."

Kagami suppressed the excitement in his tone. The eyes under his sunglasses flashed with light.

"Now it's certain. Yakou's reincarnation..... it's true."

"....."

The man didn't reply to Kagami's words, nor did he make any other reaction.

Kagami focused his mind and took a stance.

Sizing up the man's face:

"Right? ...Kakugyouki-san?"

Kagami had originally wanted to strengthen his tone as he said it, but when it truly left his mouth it had become a low murmur that was only barely audible.

His excitement and a similar level of tension were crashing against each other inside Kagami's body. In the moment he took his next breath, in the moment he blinked,

there was a possibility that the curtain would open to a fierce battle, to which the battle that had happened in the branch would be a skit in terms of intensity. Just bending a single finger, just shifting his body a little, was enough to make him lose his calm.

But the man kept silent, just staring at Kagami's reaction. It seemed that a powerful light flashed in the depths of those narrow eyes for a moment, or was that just an illusion?

Then,

"......Your name?"

"Kagami. Kagami Reiji."

"I've heard of you. The 'Ogre Eater'."

"What an honor. I didn't think you would notice me. It should be an unsightly nickname to you, right? How is it? Want to test it out?"

"......Well."

The man smiled. Kagami's excitement and tension also reached their limits.

But,

"I'll have to wait until next time."

"What."

"I've already seen enough interesting things today."

In contrast to Kagami, the man replied in a tone without any intent to battle.

When the man turned to leave, Kagami inadvertently took a step forward.

But the man spoke without even turning around.

"Bring it with you next time."

"It?"

Right after Kagami asked back, he immediately realized his meaning. He meant Shaver, or more accurately, 'Higekiri'.

Kagami laughed.

"Haha. It seems like 'that rumor' is true. The legend having to do with Kakugyouki. In that case, isn't it more convenient for you that Shaver's not here? After all, you tasted bitterness once before!"

He deliberately provoked him. To be honest, without Shaver present, Kagami didn't have the confidence that he could win against this man. But it was too pitiful to just let him run away like this.

Even if Kagami endeavored to provoke him, the man didn't plan on making him into an opponent.

He just turned over his shoulder and said:

"Brat, when the time comes, we'll see who's stronger between you and Watanabe no Tsuna."

Then, he didn't stop again, slowly and leisurely leaving the alley.

Kagami didn't budge an inch until after the man's figure vanished and until even the miasma had completely disappeared.

Only after the man left did he finally show a smile from the bottom of his heart.

Kagami murmured along with that smile.

".....What a ruthless man."

This was an incident within thirty minutes after the Meguro branch spiritual disasters had all been purified.

Part 3

Upon receiving the report from the Meguro branch after the sun set, the Onmyou Agency fell into a commotion like a disturbed beehive. Since the spiritual disasters had happened so suddenly and the information was complex, the spiritual disasters in the branch had already been almost completely purified by the time the Exorcist Bureau submitted a formal report. This was also after the Twin-Horned Syndicate sweep operation in the Shinjuku branch had ended.

The Onmyou Agency's functions had originally been dampened because of the shockwaves from the sweep operation. When the Meguro branch 'fell' as well, they were completely paralyzed. Quite a portion of the agency employees had to stay overnight to deal with the aftermath work in order to be able to at least restart their normal duties in the morning. That day that started with the Mystical Investigators' forced investigation would remain in their memories as a disastrous day for the Onmyou Agency.

But the final scene that stayed in the agency employees' memories hadn't begun yet. Rather, this was the impetus for a scene that not many knew about.

This was the Onmyou Agency building, very close to Akihabara.

Amami strode quickly through the agency building corridor with a solemn expression.

In front of him was the executive room. It was the office of the Onmyou Agency's highest officer, Kurahashi Genji. Even if Amami understood the Onmyou Agency's current condition, he still had to find the time to report to Kurahashi confidentially as soon as possible. Amami had given the clean-up of the Twin-Horned Syndicate sweep operation to his subordinates and had left the scene.

But, just as Amami was hurrying over, the sound of a phone ringing came from his suit pocket. It seemed that he had forgotten to turn his phone off. Amami clicked his tongue, looking at the name displayed on the screen.

"What. It's Miyo-chan."

The phone call was from the Onmyou Academy principal Kurahashi Miyo. Presumably, it was for a dressing-down related to the Meguro branch commotion.

She always failed to understand the difference in jurisdiction between the Mystical Investigators and the Exorcist Bureau at this kind of time. Anyway, her usual practice was to scold Amami first and ask questions later.

Amami held the phone he didn't want to listen to as if he had drawn the joker. Though he would have to endure an even greater anger after the negotiations here adjourned, he would still have to wait and see. Amami waited for the phone to stop ringing and then muttered the second-class incantation "may I avoid disaster" while turning off the phone.

Just then,

"Oh? Amami-san."

A bearded man in a suit greeted Amami in surprise. He was a short man who always appeared to be dissatisfied - but magically who also felt amicable.

This was the director of the Exorcist Bureau Purification Command Room, Miyachi Iwao. Even if it couldn't be seen from his external appearance, he was in a position of command over all of the exorcists in the Exorcist Bureau as well as a powerful Independent Exorcist.

"Why are you here? The Mystical Investigators should be super busy around now."

"Oh, Miyachi. Why have you come? I heard about the Meguro situation."

Amami asked the surprised Miyachi a question back, but Miyachi just responded with a weak "Well..." and showed a bitter expression.

"We really failed. The details aren't extremely clear, but it's said that the scene had already reached Phase Four..... Moreover, I don't know what he was playing at, but Kagami who should have been nearby seems to have left the scene. Also, his shikigami - that Shaver - went out of control..... Fortunately, he was dealt with before aid arrived."

"Ah..... I should be the one ashamed about that. The Mystical Investigators missed Captain Eto. To think he would be connected with a magical tool that created spiritual disasters. It seems to be a remnant that Mutobe left behind during the spring..... What a disaster. The Lingering Spirit Division still hasn't been dispersed."

"It's both of us. But it's really a fortune among misfortunes that this incident could be dealt with while limiting the damage to within the bounds of the branch. Anyway, we shouldn't receive too much criticism from the outside."

Even though his relaxed and lively words and actions didn't suit the severity of the situation, it really was like Miyachi's style. Amami averted the heavy atmosphere with a quiet, wry laugh as he faced the depressed bearded man.

Seeming to happen to be going in the same direction, the two of them continued through the corridor side by side. "Come to think of it." Miyachi brought the topic back.

"Amami-san, is it alright if you're not with the Mystical Investigators? Though it's the same for me."

"Well..... There's actually something I'm very concerned about. I wanted to report to the Chief directly."

Amami answered vaguely and indifferently. "Huh?" Miyachi showed an unexpected expression.

"......You're reporting now?"

"Yeah, that's right..... What? You look like you don't accept it."

"......Actually, the Chief also called for me."

"What?"

Amami inadvertently gazed at Miyachi again.

He had something he had to 'secretly' tell Chief Kurahashi. Even though he hadn't explicitly said so, Amami obviously meant for the two of them to talk one-on-one.

But the urgency of the Meguro branch situation was even higher. Perhaps it had a higher priority than the Mystical Investigators' operation, which had already come to an end. Moreover, Amami hadn't mentioned anything specific to Chief Kurahashi about needing to talk to him as soon as possible. Maybe the Chief planned on listening to his and Miyachi's reports at the same time. That wouldn't be anything strange.

Moreover, to Amami, it wasn't particularly inconvenient to have Miyachi with him. What Amami wanted to report was an extremely sensitive matter in some sense, but Miyachi was experienced enough in this regard and trustworthy. Maybe it would even save them some effort to have him listen on the side.

On the other hand, Miyachi was also confused - actually, he was thinking about something with quite a serious expression.

He quietly murmured,

"......I have a bad premonition."

"What?"

"No..... It's just me."

The bearded Miyachi closed his mouth.

It was quite rare for the normally open-hearted Miyachi. Amami's face also tightened.

Then, the conversation between two of them stopped. They continued walking all the way to the executive room.

The secretary's seat in front of him was empty. Perhaps the secretary had shied away beforehand. Amami walked directly into the depths of the room and knocked.

"Chief. It's Amami. Miyachi's here too."

A quiet reply immediately came from the room. Amami opened the door, saying "excuse me".

The Onmyou agency building's executive office was a room renovated correspondingly sedately. In the carpet-covered space was placed a wide desk and a sofa and tea table used to receive guests. The JR Akihabara station and the nearby high-rise buildings could be clearly seen through the wide windows.

The person sitting behind the desk nodded politely after seeing Amami and Miyachi.

His sturdy physique gave off a calm, serious feeling. He was a man that could be associated with iron.

His age was already over fifty, but his heroic spirit hadn't decreased. Rather, he had become deeper and more mature. He showed a stern smile and simultaneously revealed sharp, calm, and penetrating eyes. The pressure from his body could make the person before him naturally straighten their back.

This was the head of the famous Kurahashi family, the Onmyou Agency chief, and the concurrent Exorcist Bureau Chief.

Hailed as the leader of the Twelve Divine Generals, the most outstanding contemporary National First-Class Onmyouji.

Kurahashi Genji.

"Section Chief Amami. First, thank you for coming."

Kurahashi sincerely thanked Amami for his toils. This was a calm voice that one could perceive a deep heritage from. Amami lightly nodded to reply, then directly walked near the desk. After Miyachi behind him met gazes with Kurahashi, he also lightly nodded affirmation and then stopped behind and to the side of Amami.

"Pardon me for saying this directly. Chief, unfortunately, the operation this time partly failed."

After he announced that, Amami started reporting directly without concealing anything.

Kurahashi's expression only changed a sliver upon his subordinate's straightforward words. But that was it. On one hand, it was his immovable character, and on the other hand it proved that he understood Amami extremely well.

But,

"How rough."

He showed a bit of a wry smile.

"Please explain."

"My plan wasn't careful enough. The Twin-Horned Syndicate's roots are still very deep. All we swept away were the part of the weeds growing on the surface..... But

I fear that the root portion might already be a different thing than the 'Twin-Horned Syndicate'."

"......Tell me the details."

Kurahashi urged him to continue reporting. In this kind of time, this talented official would eliminate unnecessary redundancies and focus on the dialogue's efficiency. Besides, Amami was also familiar with the Chief's practices.

Amami concisely reported on what had happened at the Shinjuku branch.

It seemed that Kurahashi had some impression of Hirata's name. After all, he had been the biggest contributor in exposing the Lingering Spirit Division two years ago. Moreover, this biggest contributor had secretly been in the Twin-Horned Syndicate.

"As for Hirata's circumstances, I felt that they were a bit suspicious at one point. So, I did a complete investigation on his origins. The results were very ordinary. The experience of becoming an orphan after his parents died isn't surprising for a Mystical Investigator. I thought that there were no particular issues. Moreover, we had also investigated those issues when he chose to infiltrate the Lingering Spirit Division and carry out an investigation two years ago, and we only let him infiltrate after we decided that there were no problems. The only thing we can consider is that he was influenced while he infiltrated them to investigate....."

"......A wise man may be ruined by his own wisdom, huh?"

"That's the kind of back-and-forth pattern of work in that area. More importantly, Dairenji Shidou was in the Lingering Spirit Division at the time. That man's charisma was proved in the terrorist attack later on."

Amami continued speaking with a bitter expression.

"To be honest, it's become doubtful whether that person was truly 'Hirata Atsune'."

"What does that mean?"

"Exactly what I said. Actually, I also felt extremely confused at this--"

It could be seen from his expression that this was an extremely rare feeling for the Mystical Investigator Chief.

Amami opened his mouth with a flummoxed expression:

"Hirata Atsune was female. Moreover, she was only a girl of at most fifteen or sixteen."

"....."

Kurahashi's expression tightened like a bow. But Miyachi, who silently listened to the report from behind, inadvertently raised his head to stare at the ceiling.

"Hard to believe, right? She used magic to camouflage herself. Moreover, she hid herself from my eyes."

The 'Divine Fan' Amami Daizen was at any rate a master of magic against humans. He was a celebrity that could be called a god in his field, especially in his grasp of illusions. That Amami had been unable to see through the disguise of his long-time subordinate. That situation was no trivial matter.

"I never thought I would be duped. And to think it was the illusion of a young girl that fooled me. Even if we haven't carried out a detailed investigation..... If I had to say, it's a magic similar to those komainu. .....No, anyways."

After Amami derided himself regretfully, he changed the topic.

"An old fool's sadness doesn't matter at this kind of time. The problem is 'when it started'. I said just now, I investigated Hirata's origins clearly a long time ago. This can't be a disguise that started from when he was born. He was definitely replaced at some point in time. In that case, the most suspicious time is....."

"......When he infiltrated the Lingering Spirit Division."

"That's a reasonable thought."

Amami nodded in approval of Kurahashi's reply. Just then, the chief shifted his body for the first time, moving away from the desk and leaning against the back of the chair.

His right hand was still placed on the table, drumming its surface. It seemed that various thoughts were hovering in his mind, but nothing could be understood from his expression.

Kurahashi raised his head to look calmly at Amami:

"......Mystical Investigator Hirata - the girl disguised as that identity - made the Mystical Investigators' information public to the Twin-Horned Syndicate. And there's definitely some force backing the girl. I understand everything up to there. But what evidence is there to prove that the force isn't the Twin-Horned Syndicate?"

"She explained herself."

"That's not like something Chief Amami would say. You're taking everything she says herself to be the truth?"

Lies couldn't be separated from work related to the Mystical Investigators. Moreover, just because the person in question believed something to be true didn't necessarily mean that it was true to other people. All that was important was confirming the actual truth.

But Amami stretched his neck:

"Hirata abandoned Makihara."

"You can't take that as evidence. With the premise that we can't confirm whether the Twin-Horned Syndicate split internally, the force behind the girl might be the other

faction within the Twin-Horned Syndicate - it's more reasonable to think that people we haven't been able to identify belong to the other group."

"......I thought so too, until I saw her shikigami."

"Shikigami?"

"Yes."

Amami showed an extremely bitter expression.

"......Yase Doji."

Kurahashi's expression became flustered for the first time upon hearing that phrase. His eyes widened slightly, a sharp light flashing in their depths.

"That girl's servant shikigami were Yase Doji?"

"She said so too. But I haven't seen true Yase Doji either. So I can't say with one hundred percent certainty..... But that strength wasn't anything to be underestimated."

Amami lowered his tone as he spoke, murmuring as if he had misgivings about the surroundings.

Yase Doji, the name of an oni.

But that wasn't the name of a particular individual. It was the name of a certain 'group of oni', as well as the name of the oni that belonged in that group.

And these oni were those who had served a certain bloodline, the souls of dead warriors, who had continued to serve their bloodline in the form of a defensive shikigami. They were the oni that were guardian spirits.

That kind of oni could be described as an extremely special type. But there wasn't an extremely clear definition of 'human souls' in General Onmyoudou, so Yase Doji

were classified as a 'Type-Ogre' servant shikigami. Of course, even so, they were still extremely strong shikigami.

But right now, what Amami noted the most wasn't the danger of the Yase Doji shikigami, nor was it because they were classified as forbidden in General Onmyoudou, as magic associated with souls. Rather, it was the Yase Doji's history - the family that they served.

The family Yase Doji served was the apex of the spiritual field in the nation's legends and history.

That is - the imperial family.

"Well, though she herself said that their 'origins are a bit different'....."

Yase Doji couldn't possibly be recreated using the General-style that had nothing to do with human souls. Moreover, since they were extremely special, there were no records related to the magic left in the Imperial-style either. Amami had never heard of the existence of a practitioner who could control Yase Doji either.

But, in case the depths of the situation included someone related to the imperial family, he feared that things would spread in a direction they hadn't anticipated.

Also,

".....If that girl posed as the true Hirata Atsune, the most suitable time should have been when he infiltrated the Lingering Spirit Division to investigate. Then when we mention the Lingering Spirit Division, there's the Imperial Household Agency. The clues fit together in a disastrous way."

The situation was serious. Amami would stop at nothing to convey that information, so he had first come to report to Kurahashi.

"....."

Kurahashi was silent. He thought silently. It was extremely rare for him, as he was known for quick decisions. But that was also a normal reaction.

Just then, a knock came from outside.

Had he not set a barrier to keep away outsiders? Amami asked Kurahashi with his gaze.

But Kurahashi didn't respond to Amami's gaze. "Come in," he said to outside.

Amami inadvertently frowned upon seeing the person who entered. Kurahashi calmly introduced the two of them.

"You recognize Representative Satake of the New People's Party, right? Satake-san. This is the Mystical Crime Investigation Department's Chief Amami Daizen."

"Ah, Chief. Of course I recognize him. Nice to meet you, Chief Amami. I'm Satake Masumi. Actually, I'm pretty sharp in these areas. I'm honored to be able to meet the eldest of the Twelve Divine Generals, and I hope we can get along."

Satake Masumi spoke with a frank attitude and smiled slightly.

Though he was a politician, he was probably only about thirty. He looked fashionable and a bit frivolous at the same time, and it might be easier for people to understand if he called himself an actor. Amami had seen him frequently on the television recently, and he was surprised that this kind of moderate politician had appeared here. But this political faction that dared to advocate unrestrictedly in society had great support centered on young people.

Amami adopted a polite attitude towards the smiling Satake - but anyone with eyes could definitely realize that it was cold - and briefly replied with "Looking forward to it."

His gaze returned to Kurahashi, asking for his intent. Kurahashi's expression didn't change at all, and he just gave the businesslike reply, "I had originally agreed to meet him today."

Come to think of it, the operation targeted at the Twin-Horned Syndicate that the Mystical Investigators had implemented so resolutely was preparation for the Onmyou law legal reform, and out of consideration of other agencies competing for political dominance. And this Satake was the politician who advocated for this reform.

On the other hand, the Onmyou Agency Chief Kurahashi's duty was as the helmsman of the Onmyou Agency organization. The helmsman couldn't just complete his work by looking at the situation at hand. Rather, he had to look ahead - outside the agency. As a result, the current Kurahashi almost never participated in work within the Onmyou Agency and Exorcist Bureau. Even if when spiritual disasters appeared and the agency building was attacked, he gave complete on-site command to Amami, Miyachi, and other reliable subordinates. Kurahashi's 'battle' was in the political field outside of the world of magic.

So, Kurahashi had joined hands with Satake Masumi, the representative of the New People's Party. Of course, more accurately, it wasn't Satake Masumi who had become Kurahashi's companion, but rather, the faction he belonged to which was the largest one holding office. Satake was a window into that faction - the face of that faction, possessing the position of their representative.

Whether in personality or external appearance, the two of them were complete opposites. But with the New People's Party in power, the relationship between Kurahashi and Satake hadn't broken and continued to today.

Amami glanced behind him at Miyachi.

"......Excuse me, have you met Miyachi?"

"Yeah, several times."

Satake replied straightforwardly to Amami's question. He had only introduced Amami just now, so it seemed that Kurahashi also knew that the two of them already knew each other. Miyachi hadn't said a single word since he entered this room. His expression was very bitter, as if he were chewing on a lemon.

Satake had come to check on the success of this operation. But Amami's report was extremely important and was about to turn to a profound question that couldn't be disclosed to outsiders.

But,

"Where did you guys get to? The princess?"

"No."

Kurahashi refuted him concisely.

Amami seemed to have been struck by lightning.

"...Wait."

Amami gave up his pretenses, interrupting them with an extremely severe tone and staring at Kurahashi.

The Onmyou Agency Chief's face was like iron as he looked back at Amami without moving.

"......What's going on here?"

"....."

Kurahashi didn't reply to Amami's question.

Rather,

"How remarkable."

Satake sighed joyfully.

"With that reaction, no wonder you're an Onmyou Agency veteran responsible for the Mystical Investigators. So, you haven't entered the 'main topic', but you realized this much just from my words just now. It's good that you could understand so quickly."

Satake's eyes widened upon hearing what Amami pointed out.

He really was a man whose movements were all exaggerated like an actor's. But he was a politician, as well as one who had gotten high up in the largest faction in power at a young age. That kind of flippant attitude was just a superficial mask.

"Even more and more remarkable. I really wish the old men in the party would learn from you. Chief, could you introduce them?"

Kurahashi closed his eyes upon seeing Satake propose this with a smile.

"......I have no choice."

The voice he replied with didn't have any emotion.

Satake turned around and looked at the door he had just entered through.

"Princess, come in."

A moment later, the door to the executive office opened.

The one who entered was a red-haired girl, the girl he had seen at the Shinjuku branch - the girl who had become Hirata before.

She walked in front of Amami, who had defeated her once, her face a bit nervous.

Nervous, but with no fear. The pretty eyes that watched him from under her red hair were still unyielding. A girl with a seemingly awe-inspiring temperament - as if she were a young emperor.

"......Princess, huh."

Amami smirked.

Satake coughed dramatically:

"You should already know very well, in some sense. After all, she worked under you. But that kind of magic isn't just sound, it even changes the movements and tone. Because the magic was too forced, we were relieved that the situation was never exposed during that long period of time. In any case, let me introduce you again. She's--"

"...Satake."

The girl's stern tone interrupted the chattering Satake. Her attitude was suitable for the majestic label of 'Princess'.

Then, she stepped forward and bowed her head, her red hair drooping downward. Amami was a bit surprised and taken aback.

"I'm extremely sorry, Chief Amami. Please forgive me for my rude actions before. Hello again. My true name is Souma Takiko."

"Souma....."

Amami seemed to think of something upon hearing that name. If not for the conversations just now, he probably wouldn't have thought of it instantly.

"......I seem to remember that Dairenji Shidou's old surname was Souma....."

Dairenji Shidou, as the Lingering Spirit Division Chief and the leader of the Twin-Horned Syndicate, had married into a traditional Shinto family.

Satake seemed to be greatly impressed.

"You catch on quick. Now, let me say that he was my uncle."

"What?"

"The Souma family is the master of my Satake family. But my uncle was not a member of the main Souma family. As for the main family..... all that's left is her."

"....."

Amami tightly pressed his lips together, dumbfounded. Something seemed to flash across his brain and burst into sparks.

Establishing the Lingering Spirit Division, Dairenji's old surname, Souma Shidou. And the princess who introduced herself as direct descendant of the Souma lineage.

In an incredulous tone,

".....You said the Yase Doji's origins were different, because of 'that'?"

Satake broke out into a smile after hearing the deep meaning in those words, affirming Amami's doubts.

Amami couldn't hold back from groaning, various thoughts hurtling through his mind. But, though he vaguely knew their 'true identities', his current information was too little. Right now, he couldn't make a precise conjecture - moreover, it was very dangerous.

But, there were more things he had to confirm.

Amami turned his back to the girl - Takiko - and turned to the desk again.

Kurahashi was as steady as a rock, calmly gazing at Amami.

"......What's going on here?"

He repeated his question just now.

"Let's leave the true identities and goals of these people aside for now. But they undoubtedly controlled the Twin-Horned Syndicate from the shadows. Then, Chief, why are you so close with this group of people?"

His voice was very calm on the surface, but it contained a magma-like heat on the inside.

Kurahashi met Amami's gaze head-on.

After a brief silence,

"......There's no need to talk any further."

He made a brief declaration with that as the opener.

"In order to restore the rights Onmyouji are entitled to, amending existing legislation and expansion of the Onmyou Agency's jurisdiction are necessary."

"So you incite the Yakou believers and don't hesitate to cause spiritual disasters?"

The old man's indignation shook the air in the room.

Takiko and Satake stood still, but Kurahashi accepted his subordinate's verbal abuse head-on without issue.

He said simply,

"This is necessary."

An intense heat radiated out of the glare that Amami stared at Kurahashi with, as if it were going to catch flame.

"......Do you know how many people died until now?"

"Many, and there will continue to be sacrifices in the future. But,"

Kurahashi parried Amami's gaze with an iron will.

"This is the decision of the 'Kurahashis'."

That sentence contained many implications.

Kurahashi was the Onmyou Agency Chief. But before, since the Onmyou Agency had been established - in addition, since the beginning of its predecessor, the Onmyou Bureau - the Kurahashi family had always dominated the Onmyou Agency. It wouldn't even be too much to say that the Kurahashi family had completely constructed the magic community after the war. The 'Kurahashis' were an amalgamation comprised of a long history and many achievements, and the individual Kurahashi Genji was only a part of that.

The 'Kurahashis' were the lords ruling the closed magical world.

What the Chief had just said proclaimed that it was the lord's decision to use the Twin-Horned Syndicate to strengthen the Onmyou Agency's power.

"......How manipulating and profit-mongering. People of this age always have to spend effort writing a script even for action movies."

Amami clicked his tongue, arrogantly smiling like a wild beast.

At the same time, it was also the smile of a wile beast backed into a corner.

"......Amami-san."

Miyachi, who had been watching everything silently, spoke to him in a warning tone.

Miyachi and Satake knew each other. Moreover, he hadn't spoken since entering this room. That meant he knew about the activity in the shadows since long ago. But he hadn't been told that this kind of situation might occur here and now.

He pleaded, the gloom showing on his face.

"Please."

Right now he could probably guess the reason Kurahashi had Miyachi accompany him. Kurahashi Genji was the Onmyouji regarded as the leader of the Twelve Divine Generals, but if it were limited to magic against humans, the 'Divine Fan' Amami Daizen was superior. Moreover, even if he couldn't win against Kurahashi, it wouldn't be difficult for someone of Amami's power to escape from here.

But, he couldn't escape from Miyachi.

Mastery of magic against humans was meaningless before Miyachi. If Kurahashi was the current highest-rank Onmyouji, then Miyachi was undoubtedly the current strongest Onmyouji. His nickname was 'Enma' Miyachi, but actually that was the mistaken nickname of the young modern Exorcists who didn't understand Miyachi given to match his large beard.

Veteran exorcists called him something else, with deep respect.

'Fire Demon' Miyachi.

Consider Kagami Reiji, who was good at the Fire Realm magic. Miyachi had in fact been the one who instructed him. Miyachi had even been called Acala's child, and Amami's illusions were meaningless before him. In extreme terms, even if Amami used illusions to confuse Miyachi, he just needed to incinerate the room or even the whole floor. He would just exclude Kurahashi as a target.

Miyachi's 'request' was that he didn't want Amami to force him to take such action, and nothing else.

The meaning was, please don't pointlessly resist.

".....The decision of the 'Kurahashis', huh."

Amami repeated mockingly.

"But Miyo-chan probably doesn't know about this, right? She shouldn't know. If she did, she couldn't possibly sit still and watch."

Amami was fully confident about this. Kurahashi also nodded, supplementing.

"......My mother is not a 'Kurahashi'."

Kurahashi Miyo hadn't been born in the Kurahashi family, she had married into it. But to think that he asserted that Kurahashi Miyo, who had even been the family head before, wasn't a 'Kurahashi'. Then who exactly were his so-called 'Kurahashis'?

The 'Kurahashis' the Chief spoke of probably didn't reference the brief period of time after the war, but rather meant the will that had been inherited for thousands of years. That was the famous Kurahashi family.

To let the darkness of magic stay eternal.

To extend such darkness.

That will, which had lived since ancient times.

With that, Amami laughed wryly on the inside.

Amami only recalled now that he had received Kurahashi Miyo's message before entering this room. She was an excellent diviner. Her message at the time might have been because she noticed the danger approaching Amami - her old friend.

Well, well. Amami shook his head.

"Look at me. I've never once gotten over my habit of underestimating women."



Afterwards.

The others had left, and only Kurahashi and Takiko were left in the executive office. Though Satake had wanted to stay, he was unwillingly waiting outside as per Takiko's order.

The two of them stood in front of the window, looking outside, but the two of them weren't viewing the scenery. They just wanted to avoid the awkwardness of facing each other.

"I thought you already knew, but--"

Kurahashi calmly opened his mouth.

"In the end, the biggest reason for this incident is to let you become a Mystical Investigator despite the others' complaints. It wasn't just today. In the Domahoshi incident last month, although he was about to be captured, you shouldn't have gone ahead and taken such actions on your own. Even if he fell into the hands of the 'Onmyou Agency', there were still 'things we could do'.

"An extremely childish judgment", Kurahashi reprimanded. Takiko lowered her head, lightly biting her lip.

"The information of the Mystical Investigators was indeed necessary, but you didn't need to go infiltrate yourself to investigate. I hope that you make sense of your own position."

If Satake were here, he would definitely have defended her and rebutted.

But Takiko faced Kurahashi's dressing-down:

"It's as you say. I'm extremely sorry."

She bowed apology with a sincere attitude.

"But..... I wanted to do something, no matter what. I'm the only one who can act on my own."

It had been Kurahashi who cast the magic on the girl to change her appearance. If it hadn't been him, it definitely wouldn't have been able to fool Amami. Though Amami had seen that it was similar to the komainu - the Onmyou Academy's Alpha and Omega - it had actually just been a similar type of magic as the one that had been used on them. In addition, he had also added several 'soul'-related magics secret to the Kurahashi family.

Takiko had continuously borne those magics since she had snuck in to investigate two years ago. She had endured no small amount of danger.

"In order to achieve our desire, I'm definitely not willing to sit back and relax. I want to dirty my own hands, like my companions."

In response to that excuse, Kurahashi moved his gaze and looked at the girl's face.

Although Takiko and Satake's goal was close to Kurahashi's goal, they were different. They were in an alliance, but they still were just using each other. Takiko's excuse of not wanting Kurahashi to do all the dirty work was probably because she wanted to express an intent of strengthening their relationship by sharing the responsibility of the dirty work, but there was no real meaning to it, she was just speaking out of sentiment.

Takiko called Kurahashi's side a 'companion'.

That was because Takiko thought what Kurahashi and his side did was a noble act of devotion unbeknownst to anyone for the sake of the magic community. Even if the public didn't understand, anyone who truly had interest in Onmyoudou could agree. She firmly believed this.

"That's your naivety."

"Maybe."

Takiko agreed with Kurahashi's evaluation. But the determination that emerged on her face didn't waver.

"Chief Kurahashi. I want to confirm something."

"What?"

"Regarding the Tsuchimikado - Natsume."

Takiko turned her head to look at Kurahashi as she spoke.

"I don't want to say the same thing as the people in the Twin-Horned Syndicate. But, if he truly is Tsuchimikado Yakou's reincarnation, he could become a strong companion of ours. In addition, he might guide us. Just like your 'Kurahashis', aren't they the 'Tsuchimikados'?"

Just like how Kurahashi Genji was part of the Kurahashi family, Tsuchimikado Natsume was a member of the Tsuchimikado family, also rooted in the darkness of the magic community that extended back to ancient times and had weathered and survived many generations until now. The 'will' of the family and bloodline already formed something surpassing any 'individual'.

Even if the 'Kurahashis' were like the lords of the magic community now, it was just a slight exception in the expansive history, a temporary place. The 'Kurahashis' were just the agents who temporarily inherited the vast darkness of the nation's magic.

After all, the 'Kurahashis' were just a branch family - subjects.

The emperors of the magic community were the 'Tsuchimikados'.

The will of the Tsuchimikado family, cultivated over thousands of years, was the true dominator of this nation's darkness. If Kurahashi Genji was a member of the 'Kurahashis', then the 'Kurahashis' were just a part of the 'Tsuchimikados'.

Come to think of it, hadn't Tsuchimikado Yakou perfectly embodied the will of the 'Tsuchimikados'?

".....If we had the 'Raven's Wing', we could have Natsume rediscover his consciousness as Yakou. Didn't we know that since the Lingering Spirit Division? The Twin-Horned Syndicate will be cleaned and then restored by our hands. Right now is suitable time to take in Natsume."

Takiko proposed to Kurahashi. She had admitted to Amami that she was still a Yakou believer, although her methods were different.

She didn't mean to rely on Natsume.

But her wishes to stand together in battle were definitely not a sham. More importantly, she had already met Natsume face-to-face.

Kurahashi's vision moved outside the window and he closed his mouth.

The 'Raven's Wing' was currently in the hands of Tsuchimikado Natsume's father, the Tsuchimikado family head Tsuchimikado Yasuzumi. Complex emotions revealed themselves in the depths of Kurahashi's eyes once he thought of him.

He had originally been his main support, his right and left hand in the Onmyou Agency. They had been companions ruling over the magic community together, inheriting the wills of the 'Kurahashis' and the 'Tsuchimikados'.

But he had changed.

He hadn't denied the fact that he was a Tsuchimikado. But he hadn't chosen the 'Kurahashi', he had chosen the 'Wakasugi' - a separate branch family of the Tsuchimikado.

"......Oh well."

Takiko's eyes widened after hearing that brief sigh.

"Indeed..... We should be greeting Tsuchimikado Natsume soon."

Kurahashi spoke while looking out the window. "Really?" Takiko cheered.

Then,

"Chief Kurahashi, to be honest, I'm a bit jealous of your daughter."

"Kyouko?"

"Yeah. After all, she can go to class with Natsume and Harutora every day together. But that's going to be over soon. Chief. When we welcome Natsume as a companion, let me say hello to your daughter."

Takiko spoke with a cheerful tone. She, Natsume, and Kyouko were the same age, and they originally should have gone to the Onmyou Academy together and steadily walked their paths. The reason she usually wore the Onmyou Academy uniform was because she held those beliefs in her heart.

"I feel like I'm dreaming."

Takiko sighed. At that point, a tear even sparkled in the corner of the girl's eye.

The girl's happy appearance made one feel that she was even younger than her true age and that she was cute and innocent. The tear brimming in her eye was undoubtedly a pure tear dripping from her soul.

But Kurahashi knew. Overly pure things would sometimes become poisonous. Actually, just like a few hours ago, she had killed off a comrade. At the time, she hadn't shed a single tear.

Kurahashi ignored Takiko's happy demeanor. His steely eyes kept gazing into the Tokyo night.

Artificial lights embellished the streetscape. But the only thing that hadn't changed from a thousand years ago was that there was still darkness surging in the shadows.

Part 4

That night, as she was returning home, Kyouko didn't speak with her grandmother who had frantically rushed over after hearing the news. She took a shower to wash off her sweat and walked straight into her bedroom without eating.

An extremely hectic day. Her body and soul were exhausted, and she wanted to rest as soon as possible, even if just for a moment. Those thoughts were understandable.

But actually, Kyouko just wanted to escape the reality before her as soon as possible.

She lay on the bed, closing her eyes. She drove all her thoughts out of her mind. The moment Eto had been killed, the spiritual disasters that happened one after another, fleeing in disorder as they chased. Shaver. The battle against Shaver.

Kyouko closed her stiff eyelids, desperately clearing her mind.

But.

Two things wouldn't go away, no matter what.

Natsume, who had been spat out by the whirlwind of magical energy and had collapsed on the ground. The scattered black hair and snow-white skin.

Also, there was something else.....

"....."

Kyouko closed her stiff eyelids, desperately clearing her mind.

But the more she didn't want to think, the more the scene emerged before her like a curse. Those words at the end were branded onto Kyouko's heart.

Kyouko closed her stiff eyelids.

That scene wouldn't go away, as Kyouko was well aware. The words she said couldn't be taken back. In ancient times, people even called them 'curses'.

Cursing another was cursing oneself. That was what it meant.

After Shaver left Higekiri and vanished, cheers had resounded after a momentary pause.

The surrounding Exorcists loudly praised Harutora's feat. Touji had made a 'guts pose', Suzuka had happily jumped up with her hands raised, and Tenma had been moved to tears.

The three of them hadn't paid any heed to the exorcists telling them to stop and had energetically run to the courtyard, whose safety hadn't been verified yet. Kyouko had also pursued the three of them, walking out as if possessed.

Harutora had already been exhausted to his limits, but he still staggered to his feet and walked next to the collapsed Natsume.

He held Natsume's shoulder and helped her up.

Touji and Suzuka had called out to the two of them. Though she couldn't clearly hear what they said, their voices were full of excitement and joy. But when they arrived next to the two of them, they seemed to stop as if thinking of something and looked over.

I see. Kyouko understood.

The two of them had already known.

But Tenma, who looked at Harutora and Natsume, showed similar confusion in his joy. Of course, an awkward expression had emerged amidst the happiness of escaping danger on Harutora and Natsume as they faced Tenma and Kyouko.

Tenma muttered a few words.

Harutora and Natsume's bodies shivered.

Harutora put his hands on Natsume's shoulders, and Natsume pulled on Harutora's uniform, as if to wrap her arms around herself - or to cross her arms over her chest as if to hide something. With this, she couldn't help but feel that it was inconceivable that she had never realized anything.

A beautiful, cute girl.

Also, Harutora as he protected her. The selfless posture of a 'boy'.

...I see.

The ribbon that vanished at that time. Her childhood memories.

It hadn't been Natsume who forgot.

She hadn't known anything from the beginning.

The one who forgot about the promise--

Tenma said something, having trouble concealing his confusion and shock, but still approached Harutora and the others. Harutora showed an expression they had never seen on him before. Natsume lowered her head and kept repeating the same words.

"Sorry."

...Ah.

Natsume also had it tough, Kyouko thought. Of course it would be difficult for a young girl to keep concealing her gender and live till now posing as a male. It was by no means unusual that she had accumulated much pain unbeknownst to anyone.

Also, it was Natsume. She definitely felt pained that she hid a secret from her companions. Kyouko didn't know why she would do this, but she undoubtedly had some reason for doing so. The reason Natsume kept a distance from others was

probably because of that secret. Natsume herself had definitely believed it would be more relaxing to be alone.

But.

Harutora and Touji had appeared. She had gotten closer and closer to Tenma and Kyouko. Her relationship with their classmates had also become a bit smoother.

Even if she still concealed that secret now, it would definitely make Natsume feel more pain and become a burden to her soul. After all, she was a friend, and Kyouko could guess this much.

Kyouko took a step forward.

Tenma closed his mouth. Touji and Suzuka went silent.

Harutora's whole body went stiff.

Natsume raised her head.

"......Kurahashi-san."

Kyouko was breathless. Sympathy and compassion poured out like from a damaged faucet.

It's alright. In this kind of time, she could definitely act 'properly'. It was the same when she approached Suzuka. She hadn't acted, but had 'properly' done what she wanted to do. She had a personality that prioritized the feelings of others in crucial times, and possessed the strength to alleviate the surrounding atmosphere with a joke. She could put her feelings to the side for now and smile.

So.

...Listen, don't you dare forget this, it's a promise.

"Liar."

She spat out that word.

Natsume's expression twisted. Harutora's body shuddered. Right afterwards, Kyouko began crying, as if her heart was hurting.

"...Liar!"

In ancient times, people called this a 'curse'.

Cursing another was cursing oneself. That was what it meant.